

German Ford autoworkers at Saarlouis plant support joint struggle with colleagues in Valencia

Our reporters
22 May 2022

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke this week with autoworkers at the Ford plant in Saarlouis, Germany. They met with members of the Ford Action Committee and distributed leaflets at the factory gates with an article detailing the role of IG Metall in preparing the plant's closure.

The article they handed out explained how the works council in Saarlouis, chaired by Markus Thal, and the chairman of the Central Works Council Benjamin Gruschka negotiated wage cuts and job cuts behind the backs of the employees in Saarlouis and Cologne, up to and including the possible closure of the plant in Saarlouis.

Twice a week, they discuss attacks on the workforce with company management in Cologne in order to win the contract for the construction of the next electric vehicle from 2026, as part of a internal Ford bidding war between the Saarlouis plant and the Almussafe plant in Valencia, Spain. Since the works councils submitted their first proposals in both plants at the end of January, they have undercut each other's offers again and again. What the German works council has offered to the top management—in jobs, wages, working hours, holidays, flexibility, etc.—is being kept strictly secret.

The article cited an appeal by the Ford Action Committee, which workers in Saarlouis have joined to wage a “real fight” against the policy of the IG Metall Works Council.

The article received strong support. Workers expressed their frustration and anger at the works council and IG Metall. Even a longtime union shop steward confirmed that the leaflet was correct. “That’s how it works,” he said.

The mood in the plant is extremely tense and explosive. Almost everyone spoke out against the bidding war between them and their colleagues in Almussafes (Valencia). A young worker described the widespread uncertainty: “It is not good that we are played off against each other here in Saarlouis and Valencia. But we don’t know anything. In politics, we are never asked when they decide anything.”

Everyone agreed that they should unite with their colleagues in Valencia and defend jobs together.

But this is what the works councils want to prevent at all costs, despite paying lip service to the contrary. A worker told the WSWs at lunchtime: “The leaflet you distributed this morning caused quite a stir.” It “ended up in the hands of the right people via internal mail,” i.e., with IG Metall shop stewards. The officials exploded, ranting and raving against the leaflet, the worker recounted with satisfaction.

He said that for years, no proper works council work has been done. “There are cuts and more cuts, and the works council just holds up its hands. We have been working reduced hours here for a long time now, almost continuously in recent weeks,” he said. Despite the workers increasing productivity, this has been accompanied by large wage losses. “Do you think IG Metall will ever come up with the idea of reducing our dues? They’re just cashing in.”

This question was raised by several workers during the campaign. Many of them are not necessarily in the union by choice. The high degree of unionisation in the plant is due to the enormous pressure of the IG Metall works councils and their most devoted representatives. The works council creates “fear and terror here, so that no one looks up,” the worker reported.

For this reason, only one former Saarlouis Ford worker participated in the distribution of the leaflets in order not to expose the active members of the Action Committee to the repression of the company police force. Two WSWs reporters were also photographed “secretly” by two employees when distributing the leaflets.

A worker who has been following the WSWs’s coverage of Ford for about six months told us after the end of the shift how the works councils exert pressure on the workforce.

They wouldn’t openly threaten but operate more subtly, he explained. They make an offer that can’t be refused. “They say, ‘Believe us, colleague. We just want what’s best for you. And this is what’s best for you. Anything else would be

worse,” the worker said. If you oppose or reject the “advice” from IG Metall, you quickly find yourself in the most miserable jobs, the worker added. This is in line with the experience of the Ford Action Committee workers.

Due to the uncertainty about the future and their own workplace, many employees are already looking for other jobs. Several workers, especially younger workers, were outraged that the severance scheme is currently suspended. Officially, the works council argues that this would increase the pressure on the employer, because it finds it harder to cut jobs.

However, the former Ford worker and other workers assumed that the aim of suspending the severance scheme was to be able to produce cars until the plant is closed. The younger workers were looking for other jobs and wanted to leave, workers explained, but this had a negative impact on production capacity.

An older worker, who is already in semi-retirement, spoke about a 30-year-old co-worker who would like to leave and who already had a job offer. Since no severance payments are currently being made, he has stayed. The works council thus ensures that production can continue until the last day of the plant.

To avoid closure, Ford workers must organize themselves and take action. The pronouncements and activities of the works council are intended to prevent a real struggle to defend the plant.

For example, in the largest regional newspaper, works council chairman Markus Thal lamented over the “most brutal capitalism” of Ford management, the same management he meets with twice a week. His latest proposal was to ask German Chancellor Olaf Scholz (Social Democrats, SPD) and EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen to fly to the company’s headquarters in the United States to petition Ford.

Anke Rehlinger, the new Minister President of the German state of Saarland and also the former state Minister of Economic Affairs, and Jürgen Barke (SPD), the current Minister of Economic Affairs, have already submitted to this pathetic undertaking. They flew across the Atlantic last week and visited the Ford World Headquarters in Dearborn, southwest of Detroit, Michigan. Prior to the trip, Rehlinger and Barke “once again coordinated closely with the employee representatives of Ford Saarlouis,” they said. In a video exchange, they had talked to Thal, among others.

The chief executive of Ford, Jim Farley, did even not take time to meet with the delegation from Saarland. Instead, after a journey of 6,600 kilometres (4,100 miles), the state politicians sat down with European CEO Stuart Rowley, the managing director of the German Ford plants Clemens Doepgen and two other Ford managers.

Rehlinger promoted the Saarlouis plant, located in Saarland, Germany. But these appeals fell on deaf ears. “It’s true. Companies decide about their locations and about thousands of employees and their families,” she said. She added that she previously experienced this. “In order to save [the Halberg Guss plant in Saarbrücken], I threw everything that the Saarland had into it.”

The Ford workers should be warned by these remarks. The Halberg Guss plant was closed at the end of March 2020. Prior to that, IG Metall and the works council broke off strikes by workers in Saarbrücken and Leipzig after seven weeks without a result and advertised the company for sale to investors. Most recently, the car supplier declared insolvency and failed to pay the severance payments agreed to six months earlier and, eventually, the wages as well.

Rehlinger explained, “It is important to mitigate negative effects and at least to compensate for them by positive developments” because “the economic success of our state is not dependent on one company.”

Thal may whine about “brutal capitalism,” but in reality he and other works councils benefit from it. They are well paid for their role as company police. Unlike the employees, they have a soft landing. Indeed, the works councils of IG Metall assert that “companies can decide about their locations and about thousands of employees and their families.”

But workers must not allow shareholders to decide on the locations of their production facilities in the interest of their profits. The employees themselves must be able to determine the fate of plants that provide for the livelihoods of thousands of employees and their families.

This principle must be fought for. In the era of globalisation in which global corporations can simply shift their production from one country to another, no pressure on companies helps if it is limited to one country. The struggle to defend the livelihoods of thousands and, ultimately, millions of working class families must be fought internationally.

The unification of Ford workers in Saarlouis and Almussafes is an important first step in this direction. To achieve this, the Ford Action Committee must be expanded.

Contact us and send a Whatsapp message to the following number: +491633378340



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