

IG Metall union “social collective agreement” means closure of Vallourec steel tube plants in Germany

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On May 18, the steel tube company Vallourec announced the closure of its plants in Mülheim (750 jobs) and Düsseldorf (1,650 jobs) by the end of 2023. Two days later, the IG Metall (IGM) union announced that it would now use all its power to bring the closure of the two plants to a smooth conclusion.

The IGM published a statement titled: “Now we fight for the social collective agreement.” It is an attempt to take the workforce for fools and should be treated accordingly by every worker concerned.

What does “fighting for the social collective agreement” mean?

It means that the IGM and its works council representatives are refusing to mount a struggle to defend all jobs and want to push 2,400 workers into unemployment via severance pay, so-called “transfer companies” and early retirement schemes. With rapidly rising prices, for the workers concerned this means falling incomes and low pensions that are not enough to live on.

Many thousands in subcontracting firms, who will also lose their jobs, are being left empty-handed. The same applies to local shop and restaurant owners and other small traders who will have to close down if the area becomes an industrial desert. In Mülheim, Vallourec is the last major industrial enterprise after Siemens.

A Turkish worker told the WSWS at the factory gate: “I am 52, what am I supposed to do if the factory closes?” There were simply no comparable jobs here, he said. “In [the neighbouring town of] Duisburg, jobs are constantly being cut at Thyssenkrupp.”

Another older worker confirmed this: “I am about to retire. But what about all my young colleagues who

still have to work for 30 to 40 years? What are they supposed to do when the factory closes?”

Although the IGM statement says, “We continue to demand guaranteed job retention, investment in the sites and a sustainable industrial concept,” this is just eyewash. The statement also claims that they will demand “severance and exit programmes in the event of necessary staff reductions in the event of an unavoidable closure of the plants.”

Those who talk about an “inevitable closure of the factories” are not prepared to fight to defend jobs. This is clear from the entire statement.

The IGM boasts it has made “numerous attempts to prevent the closure.” In reality, it has consistently refused to fight to defend the jobs and to mobilise workers in other plants belonging to the global corporation.

This was confirmed by Vallourec workers who spoke to the WSWS at the early shift change in Mülheim.

“When they started cutting jobs en masse in France, that should have warned us,” said one. But the works council did nothing until shortly before the end, he added, when the decision had already been made.

Another worker reported that his criticism had been rejected out of hand by the works council. “I often said we can’t put up with this any longer. But the works council said I had no idea and could not have a say.” Now many feared it was too late to turn the tide, he said.

Instead of fighting to retain the threatened jobs, the IGM and the works council have been making deals with the board of directors behind closed doors. The union even hired a high-priced management consulting firm to work out its own “continuation concept.” This

also foresaw the reduction of 700 to 800 jobs and was supposed to prove to the company that it could generate high profits in Germany with the help of IG Metall.

When the closure was almost certain, the IGM and the works council organised a petition to company headquarters in Paris, which fell on deaf ears, as was to be expected.

In its statement, the IGM now complains that the company seems to be only “interested in making a quick profit.” As if it did not know that before. What a mockery!

The problem is that the IGM and the works council have only ever had “the quick profit” in mind. The works council and union supervisory board members and highly paid officials, who do not have to work on the production line, are profiting handsomely. They are paid to maintain “social peace,” i.e., to block and suppress any resistance from below. And they insist on keeping it that way.

The IGM statement quotes Vilson Gegic, chairman of the general works council, saying, “When the last person here will leave the plant—that still has to be discussed with us as a works council.” If Gegic were at all concerned about the interests of his fellow workers, he would say, “We as the works council will never allow the last one to leave the plant here.” But that is not what he intends to do.

Ousama Bouarous, works council chair at the Mülheim plant, says, “This is our last industrial action, and we won’t make it easy for the employers.” If Bouarous is assuming this is “the last industrial action”—i.e., that the plant will close afterwards—then that should be taken as a warning.

On May 21, in an article about the Vallourec plant closure, the WSWS warned: “Industrial action—a strike or occupation of the plants—is indeed the only way to defend jobs. But that requires a complete break with IG Metall and its works council representatives. Even if they feel forced to organise a few more symbolic protests, they will do everything to stifle any serious fight.”

This has now been confirmed. Workers must reject the campaign for a “social collective agreement” and organise themselves into rank-and-file action committees independently of the IGM and the works council.

The first task of the action committees is to make

contact with their fellow Vallourec workers in France, Scotland and other countries to organise joint industrial action to defend all jobs unconditionally.

The closure and job cut plans of Vallourec, and the unions must not be accepted, and all jobs must be defended unreservedly. The interests and needs of the workers stand above than the profit interests of the corporation.

To wage this struggle, it is necessary to build the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (SGP, Socialist Equality Party) and organise the struggle based on an international socialist programme. Get in touch with the SGP! It supports the building of independent action committees and helps to enable international contacts with workers in other countries and other factories affected by closures. Send a WhatsApp message to the following number: +491633378340.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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