

German and Indian Ford workers discuss fight against plant closings at IWA-RFC meeting

Our reporters
11 July 2022

On Sunday, the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) hosted a meeting of Indian and German Ford workers, who are fighting to stop the closure of their factories by the US-based transnational corporation.

Attending the meeting were Ford India workers involved in the five-week wildcat strike against the closure of their factory on the outskirts of Chennai, the capital of the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Working in collusion with Ford management and Tamil Nadu's DMK government, the Chennai Ford Employees Union (CFEU) called off the militant strike by 1,500 mainly young workers on July 2, giving the company a free hand to move ahead with plans to shutter the plant by July 31. The closure would destroy 4,000 jobs at the plant and as many as 40,000 in related industries.

Ford workers at the Saarlouis plant, near the French border in Germany, also participated in the meeting. With the assistance of the *World Socialist Web Site*, the Saarlouis Ford workers have established an independent action committee to defend jobs. The Ford Workers Action Committee has fought to unite German workers with their counterparts in Spain against the bidding war the unions and works councils in their respective countries have conducted to secure production of a new electric vehicle in 2026.

The IG Metall union in Germany and the UGT (Unión General de Trabajadores, General Union of Workers) in Spain submitted competing offers to gut the wages, benefits and working conditions of their members. Last month, Ford executives announced they had selected the plant in Almussafes, Spain to produce the new EV, condemning 4,600 workers at the Saarlouis plant and another 1,500 workers in the adjacent supplier park to unemployment. The plant is slated to close at the end of 2025.

Also attending Sunday's online meeting was Will Lehman, a Mack Trucks worker in the United States who is running for president of the United Auto Workers (UAW). Lehman is fighting to mobilize workers to break the stranglehold of the UAW bureaucracy and build a powerful rank-and-file movement to defend the jobs and living standards of workers in every country.

In opening the meeting, WSWS Labor Editor Jerry White said, "Autoworkers need a global strategy to fight the global strategy of Ford." Under Ford's "Global Redesign" project, he said, the company is ending operations in India, Brazil and Russia. It has cut 12,000 jobs and sold or closed six plants in the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Spain, Russia and the Czech Republic in the last three years alone.

Ford is redirecting \$30 billion towards electric vehicles and has teamed up with Volkswagen to fight for control of the expanding EV market. It has also hired a former Tesla executive to run its newly separated EV business. In the coming months and years, White said, the automaker plans to accelerate its attack on workers at factories making internal

combustion engine vehicles, while working with the unions to create a new, low-paid and contingent workforce in their EV and battery factories.

The courageous fight by Indian and German Ford workers was part of the growing resistance of autoworkers around the world to these attacks, including the GM strike in the US and the revolt by Mexican workers in 2019, the 2021-22 strikes at Volvo Trucks, John Deere and CNH in the US, and the recent strike vote by 50,000 Hyundai workers in South Korea. The purpose of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), which was founded last year, is to coordinate the movement of the working class across national borders.

Speaking first in the discussion was a young worker at the Chennai Ford plant who was involved in the recent wildcat strike. "I am happy the WSWS has been organizing the international workforce," he said. "At the point that the union, management and the government tries to throw us down, your organization is trying to give us a perspective and program."

"Ford announced it would shut the plant last September, but due to the continuous struggle by workers they were forced to extend that deadline, now to July 31. This struggle by workers for job security was isolated and defeated by the unions. The government and the labor commissioner have been working hand in hand with Ford management. Now the union is saying that the severance settlement has been increased from 115 to 121 days' pay, just six days."

"After we complete production of the backlog of cars, the union says, then they will talk further with management about increasing the severance pay package. In this way, the union has never won any of the demands of the workers," he said, which was to preserve their jobs and incomes. "Ford management has not called back the full workforce, only 1,200 workers, and we have not been told if other workers will receive their pay. The union has also called on [Tamil Nadu's Chief Minister MK] Stalin from the DMK to intervene," he said, but the government has proven again and again to be on the side of Ford, not the workers.

Another Tamil Nadu autoworker at the nearby Renault-Nissan plant said, "We are going through the same issues. The fact that the WSWS is organizing this meeting is a very good initiative. The unions never talk about the issues in other industries; they are not happy about workers uniting in different industries. The trade unions are working to isolate the working class. For example, our union is United Labor Federation, but even in the other industries where they have that union, they are not uniting the workers, even at other automobile companies. But they claim to be 'United Labor,' that's their namesake, but they are not uniting, they are blocking workers from fighting back."

"For the past three years we have not had a new wage agreement at Renault-Nissan. The union knows workers are suffering, but they are working hand in hand with management. I appreciate the WSWS because

we workers believe that the trade union is the only way to fight our issues, that the trade union is in support of workers. But that perspective has broken down, and we agree with your analysis. We can see the role of the unions throughout the globe when we talk to workers in other countries. So I believe that this international alliance proposed by the WSWS should be expanded, and it should reach greater numbers of workers.”

The Ford Chennai worker responded briefly to these comments, stating, “Ford workers are being thrown out of our jobs. This same situation is expected to come to Renault-Nissan workers. I believe the unions are going to let us down, so I believe the WSWS through the international unity can fight for workers’ rights. I hope that the WSWS reaches the workers in Tamil Nadu and India because the workers here are not exposed to this international perspective. They still believe in the unions and courts, and those illusions need to be shattered.”

Will Lehman, a Mack Trucks worker in Macungie, Pennsylvania, in the United States, was invited to speak about the significance of his campaign for presidency of the United Auto Workers.

“I’m proud to be among you in this meeting of international workers. My campaign is not for a seat at the trade union bureaucracy’s table but to oppose the national isolation program of the UAW...”

“Workers are increasingly seeing that it is the companies and the union bureaucracies that are the enemy, and workers in other countries as our brothers and sisters. I want to make workers aware of the vastly more powerful stance of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees...”

“Ford is not an ‘American’ company; it is an international company. If it is to be fought successfully, it must be fought by workers internationally; the same for Mack Trucks’ parent company, Volvo, and the rest. The global nature of production will be made clear in my campaign. The only valid method of struggle of workers will be through international solidarity,” he concluded.

A German worker from Ford’s Saarlouis plant then spoke. “Competition between the works council between Germany and Spain was a perfidious maneuver. Saarlouis did not have a chance, and we were simply used to push down conditions for our Spanish colleagues and to extract concessions from them. In the works council we have a real Mafia that intimidates workers and tells them that it is illegal to strike. IG Metall has also done everything to prevent a strike.

“I want to express my deep respect for my Indian brothers and sisters and would like to know: How were you able to organize and carry out a strike?”

A reporter from the WSWS who has reported on the struggle in India replied, “The union never called for the strike. They also said it was illegal to strike. But the young workers initiated the strike from the beginning and kept the momentum going. In September when the plant was due to be closed, the workers demanded a vote on what they wanted to do.

“The union was forced to carry out a vote, and the majority of workers in Chennai voted to demand job security. By the next month, October, the union tried to convince the workers that job security was not possible, and the young workers accepted that initially. Ford claimed they were going to bring an electric vehicle into the Chennai plant, but this was to hoodwink the workers into completing the production of 40,000 cars before it closed the plant.

“The unions knew the electric vehicles were not going to come, but they convinced the workers to complete the production. After workers reduced the backlog from 40,000 to 1,400 cars, management said that no electric vehicle was going to come, and you are going to get a low-wage severance package. The workers got alerted and mounted a wildcat strike in defiance of the union leadership.

“From the beginning of the strike on May 31, the unions tried to isolate the struggle, concealed its talks with management and tried to liquidate

this protest. The key thing to note is that the Stalinist unions never raised anything about the loss of more than 2,300 workers because they are in an alliance with bourgeois parties and the bourgeois parliament.

“Through the intervention of the WSWS from the beginning, we exposed what the unions were doing and urged the workers to demand to know what was happening in the secret talks with management and the labor commissioner. We distributed articles about what was happening to the Ford workers in Germany and Europe, and this had a powerful impact on the workers. It was both their militancy and the intervention of the WSWS explaining the isolating role of the unions which brought the consciousness to workers about forming a rank-and-file committee, and this kept the momentum going on.”

The meeting also heard a report about the revolutionary upheaval in Sri Lanka, across the Palk Strait from southern India, where months of mass protests by workers and youth against crushing price hikes and food and fuel shortages have forced the resignation of President Gotabaya Rajapakse. The capitalist opposition parties, with the full backing of the unions, are now trying to cobble together an interim government to impose a brutal IMF austerity program.

The Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka has rejected any participation in this political trap and is fighting for the expansion of action committees, workers’ control over the distribution of vital necessities, the repudiation of foreign debt, and the replacement of the capitalist government with a government of workers and peasants, committed to socialist policies.

The meeting concluded with the unanimous passage of a resolution declaring a commitment to developing the fight against the closure of the Chennai and Saarlouis plants and the restructuring of the global auto industry at the expense of the working class:

This meeting of rank-and-file workers from the closure-threatened Ford assembly plants in Tamil Nadu, India and Saarlouis, Germany, calls on all autoworkers to join us in fighting for a global workers counter-offensive against the drive of Ford and the other transnational automakers to restructure the industry at the expense of our jobs, wages and working conditions.

The nationally based, pro-capitalist trade unions are adamantly opposed to such a struggle. That is why we are fighting to build a network of rank-and-file committees as advocated by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

We welcome the initiative taken by our fellow autoworker Will Lehman in standing for president of the US-based United Auto Workers (UAW) union. In fighting for a rank-and-file rebellion against the bureaucratic union apparatus and fighting for the international unity of the working class, Brother Bill Lehman is showing the way forward for all workers.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact