

Four weeks after announcement of Ford Saarlouis closure, works council and union demand workers stay calm

Dietmar Gaisenkersting

22 July 2022

Almost a month has passed since Ford officially announced it would cease production at the Saarlouis plant. In this time, the works council and IG Metall union have done everything in their power to sabotage a fight to defend all the jobs. Anyone who rebels against this is labelled a splitter and blamed for ensuring a bad outcome in the coming negotiations.

One thing must be made clear from the start: The IG Metall and its works council under Markus Thal and no one else bear the main responsibility for the catastrophic situation now confronting the more than 6,000 workers at Ford and in the adjacent supplier park.

Since 2019, the works council has agreed to every job cut and in return demanded that Ford secure the site. Although Ford never made such corresponding promises, 2,600 jobs have been cut in the past three years.

When Ford then launched an internal bidding war last year between the plants in Saarlouis and Almussafes (Valencia) in Spain, the works council under Thal and the Spanish works council under José Luís Parra split the two workforces. They willingly played along with the bidding war and tried to undercut each other.

For months, a small group around Thal and Ford General Works Council Chairman Benjamin Gruschka worked out plans together with management in Cologne to drastically reduce production costs at the expense of the staff. The rank-and-file Ford Action Committee's demand for an immediate halt to the negotiations was rejected.

Since the end of production in Saarlouis is scheduled for 2025 at the latest, the works council has been doing everything it can to prevent the development of a real industrial struggle. On the day the bad news was delivered—the works council had known about it long beforehand—it organized a toothless demonstration far from the plant to prevent any spontaneous occupation of the gates and a strike developing.

For over a month now, the works council has kept the workforce in the dark about the future of the plant, ensured that no one can obtain severance pay and so leave the plant early, and ensured the production figures rise. This cowardly subservience to the profit interests of the company has created

the misery in which the workforce finds itself today.

In its last two information leaflets, the works council has now announced that it wants to continue in the same manner. The leaflets are a declaration of bankruptcy by the works council and should be taken by the workforce as a call to stand up against this and not to allow themselves to be sold down the river.

In its July 12 leaflet, Thal and his works council members list all the things they claim not to know: Whether there was a potential investor for the plant, how a possible sale would be structured, what Ford was planning, what the Saarland Social Democratic (SPD) state government was planning, "from when and to what extent a social plan would be necessary," and "much, much, more."

In plain language, the works council believes that the closure of the plant is inevitable and is only concerned with the question of what this should look like and how it should take place; because it feels responsible for organizing the sell-out.

Both of last week's leaflets emphasize that Ford management was "absolutely obliged to demonstrate its own robust perspectives for the future and not to shift responsibility to third parties." In the July 15 leaflet, the works council even claims in all seriousness that Ford management, which has just decided to halt production, was concerned about the workforce.

According to the works council, it had "gained a picture in Saarlouis of what moves the workforce and what the mood is like." Representatives of Ford's European management as well as the chairman of the German management, Martin Sander, had been in Saarlouis and had "held information meetings and discussions with parts of the leadership (management, AT, foreman, HR level)." In the future, the works council and three managers would hold "weekly, fixed meeting dates" as the "Future Saarlouis" task force.

In the meantime, the works council has announced it will not take part in this task force, citing the "partly explosive mood in the plant." But this does not change the fact that it continues to rely on collaborating with management.

This complete subservience to Ford management will lead to the liquidation of the plant. The works council and IG Metall

can paint the intentions of European management in as many rosy colours as they like, but under capitalism, management is beholden to the owners—the shareholders—and not to the workforce.

Apart from Ford, all the other international auto manufacturers are in the process of abolishing workers' hard-won achievements of the past. The clock is to be turned back a hundred years. The eight-hour day, adequate wages, paid vacations, sick pay, occupational safety and much more are under attack. In the US, the auto companies, and the United Auto Workers (UAW) union have already eliminated many of these gains.

In the pandemic, many workers have paid for the corporations' "profits before lives" policy with their lives, their health and severe wage losses. Now, with rising inflation, more dramatic burdens are coming their way. Inflation is the form in which the trillion-dollar gifts to the financial markets, the costs of military rearmament and the consequences of the NATO offensive against Russia are being passed onto working people.

While workers are losing their livelihoods, the fortunes of the shareholders and the multi-million-euro salaries of the managers are growing unceasingly. This is also true for Ford. Since Jim Farley took over as global chairman there in October 2020, the entire production process has been reorganized and the last ounce of profit squeezed out of the workers. Profits are rising, and from 2026—i.e., after the Saarlouis plant is shut down—Farley wants to achieve an operating return of 10 percent.

IG Metall and its works councils in Saarlouis and Cologne have always supported Ford in achieving its goals in Germany. When 20,000 workers at Ford's Cologne plant walked off the job in 1973 and demonstrated on the plant grounds to defend 300 colleagues who had been summarily dismissed and to launch a fight for better working conditions, IG Metall and the works council stabbed them in the back.

Since then, the company has always been able to rely on IG Metall and its works council representatives when planning new attacks on the workforce. If they prevail, it will stay that way. That is the real meaning of their whining that management is not providing answers to their questions. They want to continue to sit at the table with management and work with them. They cannot imagine anything at all other than this class collaboration.

Workers' rights and social achievements, however, were not gained through backroom talks at the green table, but in a joint struggle in solidarity against the capitalists. Because this has become deeply engrained in the consciousness of the workforce, the works council in Saarlouis is now defaming any opposition to it as "not showing solidarity" and being "divisive."

In last Tuesday's leaflet, it says the workforce must not allow itself to be "divided." It was more important than ever "that we stick together and that we do not allow ourselves to be divided

by any external or internal influences and that we deal with each other in a reasonable and decent manner." A "breakdown of internal solidarity," it says, meant the outcome of the coming weeks and months "will be worse for everyone." "We should all know that!" warns the works council. "The opponent is based in Cologne and is called FORD EUROPE MANAGEMENT."

What does that mean in translation? The works council is demanding the workforce support its grovelling before the corporation. It should place its trust in the joint talks between the works council and Ford Europe Management. Those who disagree are dividing the workforce and should keep quiet. Otherwise, they will fare badly.

But it is the works council that is dividing the workforce. For it is obvious that only international cooperation between workers at all plants can defend jobs, wages and social achievements against a globally operating corporation. But IG Metall and the works council expressly reject this. Their participation in the bidding war is only the last and shabbiest proof of this.

From many years of experience, workers at Ford in Saarlouis know the subtle and less subtle methods of intimidation and punishment with which the works council has subordinated the workforce to the corporation. Security and protection from the machinations of the works council are therefore the first things that the members of the Ford Action Committee must assure inquiring colleagues.

For the Ford-Saarlouis workforce, there is no alternative but to organize independently of IG Metall and the works council. Their allies are not Ford management, but their fellow workers in Spain, India, Turkey, Romania, the US and many other countries. Contact must be made with them to defend all jobs and working conditions.

We therefore appeal to all Ford workers in Saarlouis who are prepared to fight for their plant: at the upcoming works meeting on July 28, revoke the works council's mandate to speak on your behalf. It speaks for itself, the union and the company, not for you. Elect your own independent representation which does not seek dialogue with management, but instead seeks to join forces with fellow Ford workers internationally to prepare joint action and fighting measures.

Contact the Ford Action Committee via WhatsApp at +491633378340.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact