

Opposition to works council growing at Ford Saarlouis, Germany

Our reporters
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Workers showed little interest in last Thursday's factory meeting at Ford Saarlouis. Although Ford Germany boss Martin Sander had announced he was coming and works council chairman Markus Thal had said in advance that he would be calling for a "clear concept for the future," fewer workers than usual were present.

WSWS reporters were at the factory gates all day, starting with the early shift, talking to workers going in and out. When asked what they expected from the meeting, the most common response was, "Nothing!" Some added that was also the reason they would not be going to the meeting.

"We're just pissed off!"; "They're all in cahoots"; "We're well and truly being lied to from all sides, and I stress from all sides, including the works council"; "I don't have to put up with this. This eternal talk of a plan for the future, while in reality they are destroying our future, I can't listen to it anymore." Many comments were similar.

When asked why they were not at the meeting, some responded by expressing their distrust of the works council: "I've had enough of this talk"; "It's all a scam"; "I'm not so naïve as to believe it"; "I'd rather have a coffee, it's time better spent."

Another worker recalled the 2014 closure of the Ford plant in Genk, Belgium, which eliminated 4,300 jobs, saying "At that time, only 300 workers remained, and they had the job of dismantling the plant. I assume that it will be no different here. In the end, the press plant will also be closed so that the entire site can be sold."

Thorsten, a younger worker, expressed what many are thinking: the closure decision had hit him like a blow a month ago. "I've worked here with my wife for more than 15 years. We recently built a house and have loan payments to make." He is not the only one; almost the entire younger generation has all kinds of obligations.

WSWS reporters distributed an article exposing the role of the works council as a stooge and accomplice of management and warning that Thal & Co plans to use the summer break to organize the liquidation of the plant. The article states, "There is a very clear way to overcome the control of the widely hated works council and its mafia-like methods. Building the Ford Action Committee to truly represent the interests of the workforce."

The Action Committee had already stated in January that concessions do not save jobs. It had shown that all the givebacks and concessions that had been made in the past at many sites had never led to jobs being saved. On the contrary. The concessions initiated a downward spiral, at the end of which unemployment or low-wage jobs were the outcome for many.

"On principle, we reject the blackmail and brutal competition being instigated between us and workers at other plants. Playing one off against the other leads to disaster," the Action Committee declared, demanding even then an immediate end to the secret negotiations and the disclosure of all concessions made in the internal bidding competition with the plant in Valencia, Spain.

The calls of the Action Committee and the WSWS articles are well known in the plant and are followed and supported by many. Some workers who had taken the leaflet that morning stopped to talk to reporters as they came out. "You are right! What you write is correct and true," was the most common comment.

One worker, who did not want to give his name, introduced himself as an executive board member of the IG Metall union and said that since the announcement of the closure, more and more workers openly accused Thal of having "betrayed and sold them out." Without saying it openly, he hinted that unrest in the plant was growing and that he feared there might be some kind of rebellion against the works council.

At the factory meeting, Ford Germany boss Martin

Sander tried to give the workforce a few balms. He said that there was a strict timetable, which would be adhered to. The *Saarbrücker Zeitung* quoted him saying, “By the end of September, we want to examine and evaluate the internal options under the Ford umbrella.” In parallel, talks with the state government would take place. Also, “initial visits by potential investors should take place.”

“By the end of 2022, we then want to develop an initial concrete plan for the future of the plant,” according to an “internal email” forwarded to the *Saarbrücker Zeitung*. Based on this, the aim is “to agree the future concept with the first potential investors, the works council and the state government by the end of the 1st quarter of 2023.” The task force intends to provide an interim status at the end of September 2022.

Works council head Thal emphasized—according to the *Saarbrücker Zeitung*—that it was very welcome that Ford boss Sander had now once again issued the employment guarantee. “This is of course very important for the workforce. These are clear messages,” Thal said. The workforce’s fears that Ford would pull the plug before 2025 were very great, and he was glad Sander was announcing this plan in this way. However, he said, he must now “also deliver.”

Thal warned that Ford management had “gambled away a great, great deal of trust” in recent weeks. It must be added, however, that the works council itself no longer enjoys any trust among the workforce to gamble away. It has completely discredited itself through its years of pandering to management, its involvement in the internal bidding war and the associated blackmailing of employees.

That is why the call issued by the Action Committee receives support. It states: “Today it is absolutely clear that the defence of the plant and the jobs is only possible against IG Metall and its works council representatives, not with them! Only the active intervention of the workers themselves can prevent the liquidation of the plant, which was built up by several generations over more than 50 years.”

The allies of Ford workers in Saarlouis are neither IG Metall, the works council nor the state government, but their Ford colleagues in Valencia, Cologne, Craiova, Turkey, the US and India. The workers in Valencia are paying for Ford’s promise to continue production there with massive wage cuts, job losses and the deterioration of their working conditions. All this was proposed by the works council there.

In discussions at the factory gate, it was also explained

that the Action Committee had started to develop international cooperation. Last weekend, the second online meeting of Ford workers from Saarlouis and Chennai in southern India took place. The Indian Ford workers reported in detail about their struggle against the plant closure.

Young workers there had taken the initiative and organized a very courageous struggle. They went on strike for five weeks and temporarily occupied the plant gates. But the unions did everything from the beginning to isolate and sabotage the strike. Now Indian workers are beginning to organize independently to resist this sell-out.

The announcement of 8,000 layoffs at Ford in the US and the campaign of Will Lehman were also discussed. Lehman, an autoworker in the US, is running for president of the United Auto Workers union as a rank-and-file worker, against the corrupt leadership of the union. He emphasizes that workers need their own global strategy to prevail against the international corporations that pit workers against each other worldwide. That is why building rank-and-file action committees and networking them internationally is so critical.

At the factory gate in Saarlouis, a Turkish worker said he has been reading the WSWS for some time and thought the call for an Action Committee was an important and serious proposal. He said the situation at the factory was getting worse. In the past, he had asked questions in a factory meeting, and since then has been harassed. Anyone who questioned the decision of the works council or makes a slight criticism faced all kinds of problems at work, he said. But now, the situation is getting even worse. Anyone who criticized the union and questioned its decisions must expect to be fired, he said. He thought it was important to participate in the Action Committee

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