Defend all jobs at the Daimler plant in Ludwigsfelde, Germany!

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Approximately 2,200 employees of the Daimler plant in Ludwigsfelde, south of Berlin, are threatened with losing their jobs. Production of the small trucks manufactured there is to be discontinued at the end of the decade.

Ludwigsfelde produces the so-called "open versions" of the Sprinter. So far, they have been equipped with combustion engines, but an electrically powered version is to be added from next year. The closed "panel van" models—electric and conventional—are produced at the plant in Düsseldorf.

Daimler plans to launch a new electric panel van from 2028, which will be manufactured exclusively in Eastern Europe. In the course of the planned restructuring, the "open versions" will then be transferred from Ludwigsfelde to Düsseldorf. Production of the internal combustion vehicles will be successively discontinued by the end of the decade.

This means the end of production in Ludwigsfelde. The works council and the IG Metall union have already begun talks with management to push through these plans against the workforce.

Around the world, major auto companies are using the switch to electric mobility to launch a general attack on wages and jobs. The Daimler corporation just announced the layoff of 3,600 workers at Daimler Truck in Brazil earlier this month and is also planning drastic cuts and worse conditions for the workforce at its main plants in Germany.

The plant in Ludwigsfelde, which is in the former East Germany (GDR), has been producing commercial vehicles since 1965. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1990, Daimler took over the plant to take advantage of cheap wages in eastern Germany. Production of vans began in early 1991, and the "Sprinter" model has been manufactured here since 2006. This is soon to come to an end. The company wants to position itself for the battle to re-divide the global market by increasing the exploitation of its workforce in Eastern Europe.

Yet the Daimler/Mercedes van business is already highly profitable. "In the first half of the year," finance daily *Handelsblatt* reported on September 9, 2022, "the Stuttgart-based company achieved an operating return of 9.4 percent on revenues of 7.8 billion euros and 190,000 vehicles sold. Nevertheless, there is 'need for action,' says division head Mathias Geisen. 'We need to significantly improve our cost position.'"

To accomplish this, i.e., to drive down costs, Mercedes signed a letter of intent with US-based start-up Rivian on September 8. Rivian is apparently considered an ideal partner because it is known for its unscrupulous methods. The company manufactures pickup trucks and SUVs in the US. It went public last year to raise capital in the slipstream of the e-mobility boom. In the process, it cashed in by selling shares in a way that was disproportionate to its real business performance: at times, it reached a market capitalization of up to $140 billion. However, after dramatic losses, its stock value has since shrunk to less than a quarter of that peak.

Rivian is apparently serving as a means to restructure the auto industry. In addition to shareholder Ford, Amazon CEO Bezos has also secured a double-digit stake in the company while awarding Rivian a major contract for 100,000 delivery vehicles. The August 26 edition of *Manager Magazin* sees this as part of the push by big internet and tech companies into the automotive industry. Anyone familiar with the working conditions at Amazon knows what this means for the workforce.

In Eastern Europe, the three main sites that come into question to produce e-vans are located in Hungary, Romania and Poland.

First, there is the factory in Kecskemet, Hungary. The first European Mercedes-Benz passenger car plant outside Germany was opened there in March 2012. Compact models such as the A-Class or the CLA come off the production line here. The plant has almost 5,000 employees. BMW is also investing heavily in Hungary, more precisely in the city of Debrecen. At the same location, Chinese battery manufacturer CATL also plans to build a Gigafactory to supply European auto plants, as announced a few weeks ago. According to reports, manufacturers in Hungary are now having major problems finding enough workers.

In Romania, Mercedes subsidiaries produce automatic transmissions at the Sebes and Cugir sites. In an analysis of the cooperation between Mercedes and Rivian, trade journal *Automobilwoche* of September 13 emphasizes above all the "cost advantages compared with the other locations." However, the peripheral location and lower qualification of the workforce speak against Romania, the journal writes.

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The third option is Jawor in Poland. Here, Mercedes began producing engines in 2019 and started battery production in 2021. Jawor currently employs around 1,300 workers. The plant is being talked about in the press as a promising candidate for new e-van production.

This brief overview already shows that Daimler/Mercedes workers are dealing with a corporation that operates internationally and scours the world for the cheapest labour. The only way for the workforce to defend their interests is to organize themselves worldwide.

To do this, it is necessary to form independent rank-and-file action committees that take the defence of jobs and wages into their own hands. This is the only way to prevent management and the unions from negotiating either shutdowns, massive job cuts or a drastic deterioration of conditions for one plant after another behind the backs of the workforce.

"The planned organisation of production will bring changes," declared Ergun Lümali, Deputy Chairman of the Supervisory Board and Chairman of the General Works Council of Mercedes-Benz Group AG, "which makes it all the more important now to enter into constructive talks together with the works councils in Düsseldorf and Ludwigsfelde." This can only be understood as a threat to the workers.

IG Metall and the works council reacted to management's announcement that the next generation of the Sprinter van would no longer be built in Ludwigsfelde with the familiar demand for "concepts for the future." They immediately began negotiations with management behind closed doors. When resentment among the workforce boiled over, they invited management to a factory meeting on September 29, where it is to explain and justify its plans.

Tobias Kunzmann, the leader of the Ludwigsfelde branch of IG Metall, explained in a video for the workforce: "It is now a matter of demanding that the future be secured, of demanding a concept for the future," repeating this demand several times. The site "does not deserve to die in instalments" and the workforce should ask the Management Board "the appropriate questions."

In reality, there is nothing to negotiate with the Daimler/Mercedes board. Management is determined to push through its attacks. Their windy promises that they want to explore "maintaining the site" without production taking place are completely worthless. This is shown by the experience of numerous workforces at other auto plants, most recently Opel Bochum and Ford Saarlouis, whose plants were or are being completely wound up after years of stalling.

In Berlin-Marienfelde, the so-called "Digital Factory Campus" was opened a few days ago on the site of the Mercedes plant there, where production of components for internal combustion engines is also being phased out. High-performance electric motors for the AMG sports brand are to be built there from 2025. What will actually happen by then and how many of the current 2,370 employees will keep their jobs is completely unclear. The company has only promised to employ around 200 software developers. This pathetic sell-out is being celebrated as a great victory by the union and those in power.

The union's policy is to act as co-manager and company police. With its talk of "concepts for the future," it wants to push through a massive deterioration in working conditions and ultimately the closure of the plant against the anger of the workers. In doing so, it is deliberately playing off the workers of the various countries and the various plants against each other.

To defend the jobs, a fundamentally different path is needed, one that places the interests of the workers higher than the profit interests of the company.

Workers face the same problems worldwide. They are being asked to pay for the war that NATO is waging against Russia in Ukraine, for energy costs that are skyrocketing because of sanctions against Russia, and for massive inflation.

The WSWS calls on Daimler/Mercedes workers in Ludwigsfelde and throughout Germany to build rank-and-file action committees to fight the nationalist and pro-business policies of IG Metall and its works council representatives. The only way forward is to join forces with auto and truck workers in Eastern Europe, as well as in the US, Brazil, Mexico, and the rest of the world.

To do this, the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) has been formed and is gaining support around the world. In the US in particular, workers in the auto industry have formed strike committees independent of the corrupt unions. There, socialist Will Lehman is running for president of the UAW auto workers union. He is winning enormous support with his demands for the abolition of the union bureaucracy, the return of power to the rank and file, and international unity of the working class.

Workers interested in this struggle should contact the WSWS either via WhatsApp at +491633378340 or via the form below.

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