

Contract bargaining in the German metal and electrical industries: Workers are ready to fight

Our reporters
3 November 2022

Six weeks after the start of contract bargaining, the employers in Germany's metal and electrical industries presented an initial offer following three rounds of negotiations. The approximately 3.8 million workers affected quite justifiably regard the employers' offer as a provocation.

Last Saturday, the trade union IG Metall responded to the anger of workers nationwide by organising a few short-term warning strikes and protests. Workers consider the union's original demand of 8 percent over 12 months as much too low in view of a current inflation rate of over 10 percent, but in fact the union is preparing even more drastic wage cuts.

According to the employers' association Gesamtmetall, workers are to be fobbed off with a one-time "inflation premium" of €3,000 to cover a period of 30 months. At the same time, the employers are seeking to cut other special payments such as Christmas bonuses. Instead of offering a permanent and official wage increase, the employer's side declared merely that such an offer was "prospective."

In an interview with the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, the president of Gesamtmetall, Stefan Wolf, rejected an agreement similar to that recently awarded in the chemical industry, where the chemical workers union, the IG BCE, agreed to wage cuts the likes of which have not been seen in Germany since the 1930s. In addition to a €3,000 one-time payment, wages and salaries are due to increase by just 6.5 percent over the next two years.

Wolf even demanded that "companies doing badly be able to deviate from the contract agreement," i.e., be allowed to implement even more savage wage cuts. According to the manner in which companies describe the current situation, there are probably only a handful where things are going "well." In a statement from the employers' association, its member companies complained they confronted "War in Ukraine, looming energy shortages, lockdown in China, shortage of raw materials, rapid price increases for energy and raw materials, lack of skilled workers and applicants for apprenticeships." In addition, the industry needed to "invest in structural change," i.e., financing to ensure job cuts: "A return to the pre-crisis level of 2018 is currently out of the question."

In reality, the big companies are raking in large profits. They are continually cutting their labour costs through continuous job cuts and wage reductions, while passing on most of their increased

costs to their customers.

Roman Zitzelsberger, negotiator and IG Metall district leader for the state of Baden-Württemberg and possible new head of IGM, declared that the employers' offer "would not resolve the contract bargaining." An increase in wages in line with official pay scales was the top priority in this round of contract bargaining. IG Metall has long since announced it would accept and organise wage reductions along the lines of the IG BCE model. If the union now talks about further negotiations and strikes, it is only to defuse the considerable anger in the workforce and implement the wage cuts.

The anger on the part of workers is enormous. In Baden-Württemberg, Bavaria, and the IGM district embracing the states of Schleswig-Holstein, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, Lower Saxony, Hamburg and Bremen as well as in Berlin, Brandenburg and Saxony, more than 10,000 workers in the car and supplier industry, in mechanical engineering companies, aluminium smelters, etc., have taken part in warning strikes this week. On Tuesday night, workers in North Rhine-Westphalia also joined the protests, with Ford workers in Cologne the first to leave their plant at midnight.

During the numerous protests, it became clear that even the union's initial demand for 8 percent over 12 months would mean real wage cuts with devastating consequences for workers and their families. *World Socialist Web Site* reporters spoke to workers who expressed their distrust of IG Metall and its "negotiators" and supported a united struggle by the whole working class—in particular united action by the total of 7 million workers in Germany whose contract agreements expire in the coming months.

In order to prevent a broad mobilisation, IG Metall limited its pre-announced "warning strikes" to two hours, separated in both time and space. After Mercedes-Benz workers in the south of Berlin (whose plant is to be closed) went on strike at midnight, smaller protests took place in the north and northwest of the city at midday. The union had scheduled the day of the strike for a public holiday, i.e., when nobody worked anyway in the northern federal states.

At the BMW motorbike plant near Spandau, about 150 workers took part in a rally and "human chain." Most workers participated only half-heartedly and expressed their fears regarding an eventual wage increase of just 6 percent. One temporary employed worker told WSWS reporters he calculated the offer would add only €120

to his pre-tax wage. In the face of 30 percent price increases for food and energy, he said, this was “ridiculous” and in reality a massive reduction in real wages. At BMW, temporary workers now make up 50 percent of the workforce.

An older contract worker, who had only recently joined BMW, had lost his job of many years at Osram after Siemens sold off the company. He said of the IG Metall officials and their works councillors: “I saw how things went downhill at Osram. Only the IG Metall works councillors had a secure job, earned well and were exempt from work. They never organised a real fight against the dismissals to defend all jobs. Here at BMW I’m still waiting for a full-time job—but whether that will happen is uncertain because of my age.”

WSWS reporters distributed an appeal against the jobs massacre at Mercedes-Benz in Ludwigsfelde. The leaflet calls on workers to break with the unions and build independent rank-and-file committees made up of trusted colleagues. One worker, Jasmin, supported the call, welcomed joint strikes and showed solidarity with the Mercedes workers: “It only works together. We all have to stick together.”

BMW worker Cem reacted with shock to the news that the Mercedes-Benz plant in Ludwigsfelde was to be closed and raised the question why this was not being raised by IG Metall. A colleague of Cem’s stressed that the trade unions are “on the other side” and referred to the corruption scandal at Volkswagen. It was revealed years ago that IGM officials had been invited by VW management to go on luxury trips and attend sex parties: “That’s the case everywhere. I don’t even want to know what they do here.”

A contract worker of Turkish origin was enthusiastic about the fact that the *World Socialist Web Site* fights for the international unity of all workers. Asked about Ludwigsfelde, he said, “The big companies are organised internationally, so workers have to show international solidarity.” Referring to the current NATO war in Ukraine, other workers recalled the murderous war policy against Serbia of the former SPD-Green government headed by Gerhard Schröder and opposed the planned special fund of €100 billion for the German army—“while schools fall into disrepair, nursing staff are underpaid and hospital beds are cut.”

IG Metall organised its “warning strike” at the rail vehicle manufacturer Stadler, in a company driveway so that no one would notice. The protest was marked by loud music to prevent discussion and ended after just 90 minutes. On the website Kununu, which collects anonymous testimonials about companies, workers complain of “Saturday work,” “constantly excessive workload” and overtime and conditions “like in the 19th century.” Others refer to a “constant coming and going of temporary employees” who are “not integrated and also treated unfairly.” Hardly any of these grievances were addressed at the IG Metall rally.

IG Metall has no intention of responding to the demands of its members—on the contrary. At the rally in front of the BMW plant, IG Metall officials reacted with extreme hostility to WSWS reporters, seeking to ban them from the rally and prevent them talking to workers. When this failed, two IG Metall officials called upon nearby police to remove them from the public meeting.

The incident underlines that IG Metall is not in conflict with companies or the government, but rather with the workers. Since 2018 the union has only agreed to one additional payment for workers in the metal and electrical industries. Although workers have suffered wage losses in the coronavirus pandemic because of short-time work, there were zero rounds in the 2020 and 2021 payscales. In the East German metal and electrical industry, IG Metall cemented the wage divide between East and West Germany for years to come—more than three decades after the reunification of Germany.

Now, in line with the “Concerted Action” established by the unions and the federal government led Olaf Scholz, the costs of the NATO proxy war against Russia and the massive rearmament of the Bundeswehr are to be passed onto the working class. Immediately after the start of the war in Ukraine, IG Metall sided with the government and supported the rearmament of the Bundeswehr. A joint statement by IG Metall Baden-Württemberg under Zitzelsberger and Südwestmetall led by Wolf announced: “These measures will demand sacrifices from all of us.”

The readiness of workers to resist their impending impoverishment must be made the starting point for an offensive against the war and its social consequences. In order to compensate for the current inflation and earlier real wage cuts, high double-digit wage increases must be fought for, not just 8 percent.

To undertake this task, it is necessary to break with IG Metall and the other trade unions and build independent action committees to organise the struggle against war, job and wage cuts and network internationally.

The International Committee of the Fourth International has set up the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) to give direction to these committees and to coordinate them internationally.

This is the only way that the threat of broader war and the effects of war in the form of job cuts and huge reductions in wages can be averted. We call on all workers to contact us by WhatsApp message at the following number: +491633378340 or register for the rank-and-file committees below.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)