

Collective bargaining in Germany's metal and electrical industries: Workers call for all-out strike

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Last week, more than 200,000 workers in Germany took part in short warning strikes and protest actions at factories in the metal and electrical industries. There is widespread anger about the provocative behaviour of the employers' association Gesamtmetall.

After Gesamtmetall President Stefan Wolf failed to present any offer at all for six weeks, the employers' organization followed with an offer that amounts to a provocation.

The approximately 3.8 million employees are to be fobbed off with a one-time "inflation premium" of 3,000 euros covering 30 months. At the same time, Gesamtmetall announced that other special payments, such as vacation and Christmas bonuses, would be cut. Wolf even demanded that "companies where things are going badly can deviate from the collective agreement," i.e., be allowed to cut real wages even further.

Then follows a long list of reasons why Gesamtmetall is not offering an increase in real wages but a reduction: "War in Ukraine, looming energy shortages, lockdowns in China, shortages of raw materials, rapid price increases for energy and raw materials, lack of skilled workers and applicants for apprenticeships." On top of that are "investments in structural change," meaning money for job cuts. The employers' association missive ends with the provocative statement: "A return to the pre-crisis level of 2018 is currently out of the question."

Gesamtmetall's aggressive position is not just the usual collective bargaining poker game but the result of an agreement with the IG Metall union and the German government. Gesamtmetall boss Wolf attended all of the tripartite "Concerted Action" meetings that German Chancellor Olaf Scholz convened in the spring.

This alliance of trade unions, employers' associations and the government is a response to the growing resistance of workers in the face of rapid price increases, unsustainable working conditions in hospitals and schools, and mass layoffs in many industrial sectors. The unions and the government are moving closer together to discuss their course of action, forming a veritable conspiracy against the workers. Their goal is to saddle the working class with the gigantic sums for military

rearmament and the billion-dollar gifts handed to the superrich in the pandemic through the imposition of cuts in social spending and wages.

Commenting on the convening of the Concerted Action meetings, the WSWS wrote: "Their textbook is titled: 'Make the workers pay!'"

As part of the "third relief package" of September 3, 2022, the government decided to exempt one-time payments of up to 3,000 euros from tax and social security contributions, meaning it will not improve future pensions or other benefits. This was agreed to by the unions and welcomed by the employers' associations. It was tacitly agreed that wages would be kept low in return.

Based on this agreement, the IG BCE union, covering mining, chemicals and energy, subsequently agreed to a massive real wage cut for the 580,000 employees in the chemical industry.

In the current collective bargaining struggle, metalworkers face not only the employers' association but a united front of business leaders, the government and the IG Metall bureaucracy. In this, the union plays the role of suppressing discontent and resistance in the factories wherever possible and keeping it under control should it break out. For this reason, the warning strikes were all limited to the shortest possible duration and often used merely as a backdrop to a union press event.

A typical example is a strike in Stuttgart. There, IG Metall called Bosch workers in Feuerbach out on a warning strike last Thursday and held a rally. Those on the early shift were to leave the workplace and gather in front of the main gate at 11:00 a.m., and the rally was to begin at 11:30. Roads around the Bosch plant were closed to traffic, as if expecting a rally with many participants.

In the end, of the more than 1,000 workers at the plant, fewer than 150 showed up for the rally, most of them shop stewards, works council representatives and other union bureaucrats. The rally lasted less than 20 minutes, with two speakers spouting the usual union talking points.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to some workers who were present. One said that his colleagues did not think such rallies would accomplish anything. "It's a ritual where every

time, in the end, the results are not what is demanded.”

Aynur, a Turkish worker who has been employed at the factory for 35 years, vented her anger. She had witnessed dozens of such negotiations, she said. They were always the same and essentially meant “the workers got screwed.” From that experience, she could already say that “We will never get 8 percent,” even though everyone knows how much the cost of living has risen and that 8 percent is itself not enough.

She pointed out that earlier this year she paid less than 40 cents for a kilo of flour, now she has to pay 80 cents, and the price increases are still going up.

Many workers see through IG Metall’s manoeuvres and are calling for an expansion of the strikes. Talking with WSWS reporters, workers repeatedly stressed that such limited work stoppages, often reduced to a few minutes, “don’t do anything.”

They recalled that warning strikes had been extended to 24 hours in 2018. Such an extension of warning strikes should also take place today, several said, as a prelude and preparation for a full strike. Others stressed that the demand for an 8 percent rise was no longer sufficient in view of the current inflation rate of more than 10 percent.

Listening carefully to the rally speeches of the IG Metall officials at recent strike actions, it is noticeable that they no longer speak of an “8 percent wage increase” but only of “8 percent more money.” And when “effective increases in basic rates” are mentioned, it is always without a number being stated. They also no longer even mention the previously demanded contract term of 12 months.

This can only mean that IG Metall is in the process of incorporating the one-off payment of 3,000 euros offered by Gesamtmetall into a new contract, which would lead to further radical reductions in real incomes.

The offer of 3,000 euros would amount to only 100 euros a month extra for a term of 30 months. This would not even compensate for the extreme energy price increases, not to mention the general cost-of-living price increases, which for working class households are far higher than the official 10 percent inflation rate.

In addition, the 3,000 euros are paid out only once (possibly broken up into several installments) and then disappear again. If there is no percentage increase in basic wage rates that is permanently enshrined in pay scales, workers in the metal and electrical industries will be on the same pay scales in May 2025 that they were on in 2018, because since then there have been special one-off payments but no permanent increase in pay scales. The real wage loss would be enormous in view of rapidly rising prices.

This massive reduction in real wages is deliberate. It is an explicit goal of the collaboration between the unions, the corporations and the government as part of the Concerted Action process.

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and

Development (OECD) and IMF predict a deep recession for Germany in the coming year. Nevertheless, the European Central Bank (ECB) has raised interest rates, exacerbating the recessionary trend. The economic downturn is to be used to extract massive concessions in the form of wage cuts and social spending cuts. In this way, the costs of the war against Russia and the gigantic sums being spent on rearming the Bundeswehr (Armed Forces) are being passed on to the working class.

Immediately after the start of the war in Ukraine, IG Metall sided with the government and supported the huge Bundeswehr rearmament programme. A joint statement by IG Metall Baden-Württemberg under Roman Zitzelsberger and Südwestmetall under Stefan Wolf announced: “These measures will demand sacrifices from all of us.”

The current round of collective bargaining and the great willingness of workers to resist sliding into poverty and subsistence must be made the starting point for an offensive against the war and its social consequences. To compensate for the current rate of inflation and earlier real wage cuts, high double-digit wage increases must be fought for, not just 8 percent.

To do this, it is necessary to break with the IG Metall and the other unions and build independent rank-and-file action committees that will organize the struggle against job cuts, wage reductions and war in the workplaces and network internationally.

The International Committee of the Fourth International has created the International Workers’ Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) to provide an orientation to these action committees and coordinate them internationally.

Only in this way can both the threat of war be averted and the effects of war in the form of job cuts and reductions in real wages be averted. We call on all workers to contact us by WhatsApp message at the following number: +491633378340, or register for the action committees.



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