

Germany's IG Metall union holds warning strikes in Leipzig and Stuttgart: "In reality, an 18 percent wage increase is needed"

Our reporters

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On Monday and Tuesday, several warning strike rallies were attended by thousands of metalworkers in Germany. Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with workers from the light metal manufacturer GF Casting Solutions and the BMW plant in Leipzig as well as with workers in Stuttgart Feuerbach.

Workers from all companies declared their support for a common struggle and criticized the IG Metall trade union's 8 percent wage demand, which amounts to a massive reduction in real wages in the midst of historic price increases.

The WSWS is assisting workers worldwide to establish independent rank-and-file committees made of trusted colleagues fighting to unite workers' struggles internationally. "That's a good idea!" many workers commented on this perspective.

All respondents agreed that a nominal wage increase of eight percent would be "too little" to maintain living standards. There is growing distrust among workers towards IG Metall, which has repeatedly imposed wage freezes and real wage cuts on workers in recent years.

BMW - Leipzig

According to IG Metall, around 1,800 night shift workers took part in the one-hour warning strike at the BMW automobile factory in the north of Leipzig on Monday.

Celine, who has been working at BMW since 2019 and has only been a permanent employee since February of this year, said, "I definitely have less money available than before. I have to stop and think about whether I can refuel my car or start heating my apartment. You have to pay attention to everything now—and it can be assumed that everything will become more expensive. In the back of my mind I always have the question: Will the money be enough in winter?"

A colleague of Celine's was stunned that the health budget and social welfare benefits are being slashed by billions of euros in the middle of the coronavirus pandemic, while the

German army receives a "special fund" of €100 billion overnight: "You always wonder where the money comes from!"

"In reality, we would need an 18 percent wage increase so that our standard of living does not fall," said another long-time worker at BMW. "But I think that there won't even be 8 percent—if we are lucky, it will be 5 percent."

Due to the wage restraint on its workforce and its ruthless cost-cutting on parts suppliers, the BMW Group has made billions of euros in profits in recent years. In the first half of 2022 alone, the BMW Group reported a pre-tax profit of €16.2 billion with a profit margin of 24.5 percent.

The overwhelming majority of striking workers share the view that the nominal wage increase of 8 percent with which IG Metall has entered backroom "negotiations" with the employers is far too low. The union does this, although it itself admits that the companies in the metal and electrical industry were able to "pass on the increased energy prices to their customers" and "have increased their producer prices by 13.7 percent since January 2021."

A report published Tuesday by the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* spoke of "crushed auto parts suppliers" and "imminent devastation." When the BMW supplier BIA Forst ceased operations this September, this meant the end of operations for 154 employees who had produced radiator grills for BMW, among other things. "The manufacturers, who are currently making record profits, are accepting this with approval," the business-friendly paper notes.

But far from organizing an offensive against this profit-making orgy, IG Metall uses the "squeezing of suppliers" by BMW and other large corporations as an argument against wage increases. Under the heading "8 percent – Why so little?" the union acknowledges on its website that "according to economists' forecasts, inflation will continue to drive prices even further in 2023." To the question "Why does IG Metall then only demand 8 percent?," the IGM replies that the "serious situation" for "some small and medium-sized enterprises" does not allow for higher demands.

In fact, several workers at BMW in Leipzig told WSWS

reporters that IG Metall was spreading the claim that the discrepancy between corporations making money hand over fist such as BMW and the bankruptcy of their suppliers makes it impossible to conduct a joint struggle between workers from the entire metal and electrical industry. Others reported that the union even stated that a “wage-price spiral”—i.e. an adjustment of wages to the increased prices—must be prevented at all costs.

After barely an hour, the IG-Metall spokesman ended the “warning strike” by setting off a table firework and sending all the workers back to the factory. When WSWS reporters on their way back to the factory stated that IG Metall had no intention of enforcing an 8 percent wage increase, many workers approached them to demand a leaflet.

GF Casting Solutions

For the warning strike at the light metal refinery GF Casting Solutions in Leipzig, IG Metall gathered around 50 to 60 workers, which according to the several workers is barely 20 percent of the workforce. Within a few minutes, all workers took a leaflet from the WSWS, which reports on the growing support for an all-out strike in the metal and electrical industries.

A pensioner who worked at GF Casting Solutions for a long time commented, “In recent years, we have only ever received a wage increase of around 3 percent—this has always been far below inflation. In addition, there was a one-time payment, which was quickly gone.” Another said, “The salaries for European Parliament deputies are always automatically adjusted to inflation; why not in our case?”

At GF Casting Solutions, IG Metall’s “warning strike” was also ended after an hour. However, officials approached the WSWS reporters after just a few minutes to try to prevent them from distributing leaflets and holding discussions with workers. An older bureaucrat disparaged the reporters as “agents” and asked them to leave the demonstration with vulgar language.

Another IGM official demanded that no more interviews be conducted with workers, followed the reporters for several minutes, and tried to intimidate workers who talked to the reporters. But neither the WSWS reporters nor the workers were intimidated, they remained and discussed until the end.

Stuttgart Feuerbach warning strike

IG Metall organized a demonstration and a rally in Feuerbach, a traditional industrial district in Stuttgart with several thousand employees.

Approximately 2,000 employees from Robert Bosch GmbH, Coperion, Mahle, Koenig & Bauer MetalPrint, Voith, Lapp and many other plants took part. The workers’ willingness to go on strike was omnipresent, and the bureaucrats were eager to control the situation and prevent such a development.

During the demonstration, the IG Metall distributed balloons, which were supposed to rise into the air at the rally with the demand for an 8 percent wage increase. Most workers refused to accept the balloons. When the speaker shouted “8 percent,” the workers shouted “10 percent” or more.

Most workers are suspicious of the negotiations being conducted behind closed doors. Several said they had heard the employers’ association demanding cuts in Christmas and holiday pay, and the union was not prepared to provide information on this.

WSWS reporters also distributed the pamphlet “Collective bargaining in Germany’s metal and electrical industries: workers call for all-out strike.” When workers accepted the leaflets, many said, “We need an all-out strike.”

Sinan, who has been working at Bosch for four years, also said that he was in favour of an all-out strike. After receiving the leaflet, he immediately sent it via WhatsApp to a group of workers, asking them to read it.

“Firstly, the demand for 8 percent is not enough given the constantly rising inflation. The demand should have been 15 percent,” he explained. “This is not just my suggestion, as many colleagues I know also say so. We all know that IG Metall would not even think about 15 percent. What’s happening here is not a real fight. We can only enforce our demands through a proper strike.”

Martin, who has also been working at Bosch for 35 years, said that the offer of an additional €3,000 from the employer was a provocation, seeing that it would be less than 10 euros for a day. He knew that for years, the negotiations never end with the achievement of the demand initially made. “This time the negotiations are different and take place in a very tense situation in every respect. I don’t think colleagues would just accept any compromises,” he said.



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