

Workers in Germany reject IG Metall's collective bargaining agreement

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On Tuesday, the Grand Collective Bargaining Commission of the IG Metall union in the German state of Baden-Württemberg approved a pilot agreement, even though it represents the third consecutive cut in real wages for the metal and electrical industries, and despite galloping inflation.

Although only seasoned bureaucrats are allowed on the bargaining committee and rank-and-file members were never consulted about the wage cuts, the debate lasted several hours, and district leader Roman Zitzelsberger had trouble defending the miserable deal. That is because the officials confront overwhelming rejection at the grassroots level.

Above all, many workers criticize the fact that the enormous willingness to fight shown in the warning strikes, in which almost 900,000 workers participated, was not used to increase the pressure on the employers' associations and to achieve a better result. Instead of expanding the strike, initiating a ballot, and preparing for a full strike, IG Metall stifled and suppressed the strike movement at the decisive moment.

Rarely before has IG Metall been so clearly perceived for what it is: a bureaucratic apparatus for suppressing labour struggles, imposing massive cuts in real wages and a deterioration in social benefits in the interests of the corporations and the government.

Because bargaining committee members feared a grassroots uprising, and therefore expressed criticisms of the deal, Zitzelsberger had postponed the commission meeting, which normally takes place a few days after the deal, for almost two weeks. He used the time to bring the union apparatus into line and into position. In addition, all the authorized representatives and district leaders of the other bargaining districts were mobilized to announce the agreement and adoption of the pilot for their own district.

This was to invoke the unity of the union bureaucracy against the workers.

In an internal IG Metall podcast called "Metal Detector," Zitzelsberger reported that the chairman of the works council at Mercedes Untertürkheim, Michael Häberle--himself a member of the Grand Collective Bargaining Commission--had warned him immediately after the deal, "The place is on fire here, people don't agree with the negotiation result at all."

Three days later, a plenary meeting of IG Metall shop stewards was held at the Mercedes main plant in Stuttgart-Untertürkheim to evaluate the result of the negotiations. Häberle had agreed that Zitzelsberger himself would attend the meeting in order to counter the criticism and defend the agreement as the responsible district manager and negotiator.

Workers later reported that the atmosphere at the meeting had been very tense from the beginning. Zitzelsberger had tried to talk up the agreement, claiming that the reduction in real wages should also be seen as an offer to the employers to collaborate closely and in partnership in difficult times of restructuring and transformation, which threatened the existence of some supplier companies in particular. Moreover, Zitzelsberger said there was an increase in basic rates, even if it was not yet sufficient. In addition, he had also received a great deal of positive feedback, in which it had been emphasized that the additional tax-free payment of 3,000 euros was welcomed by many.

When Zitzelsberger said, "Of course, we could have gone on strike," he was interrupted by fierce heckling, "Exactly! Why didn't you do that?"

Shop stewards pointed out that the deal had only caused rank-and-file workers in the departments to express their anger and shake their heads. The cut in real wages, they said, was simply too great in the face of massive and continuing price increases. In addition, many exceptions

and loopholes had been agreed with the employers and many details were not known.

Despite Zitzelsberger's presence, the majority of the shop stewards voted against the agreement and called on their delegates to reject the negotiation result in the bargaining commission.

Two days later, shop stewards at Porsche in Stuttgart-Zuffenhausen also voted against the negotiation result and called for a majority rejection.

But with such votes, the unions are merely establishing a picture of the mood among workers. They are not binding on the negotiating committee delegates, a fact underscored by Tuesday's acceptance of the sell-out.

WSWS reporters spoke with workers at Mercedes in Stuttgart, Mettingen and Sindelfingen last week during shift changes. Rejection of the IG Metall was pervasive. Many workers were not willing to talk until it was made clear that the WSWS reporters did not support IG Metall. Almost unanimously, workers called the negotiation result an attack on IG Metall members.

One worker stressed that he paid his membership dues every month, but in the negotiations he and all ordinary members were not taken seriously and were not even properly informed. Several said they no longer saw any point in remaining union members and "feeding the bureaucrats with our money." They said the union had only reluctantly organised the warning strikes; workers wanted to fight and were ready for an indefinite strike, but that was not an acceptable option for IG Metall.

Johann said that IG Metall was working hand in hand with the employers' association. He had closely followed how the employers' association had always emphasized that it did not want to accept a percentage increase on basic rates. When quickly and quite surprisingly there was then talk of an agreement and a wage increase of 8.5 percent, it was clear to him, "Something is wrong here. This is a scam." The next day, he said, all the workers in his department agreed that what had happened was a total fraud carried out against the workers.

Richie said Mercedes employed thousands of temporary workers. He had been working as a subcontracted worker in Mettingen for three years. IG Metall completely ignored the subcontracted workers, he said, adding he did not know whether there was anything at all for him in this agreement. The permanent employees at the plant were sympathetic and shook their heads when they found out his hourly wage. He had spoken to several of them, and they were all upset, saying that with the current price increases, even 15 percent was not enough.

Joship said he felt it was necessary "for us to fight back against this agreement." On Monday, the day after the agreement was reached, he said, everyone was angry. Everyone could see "this is not about raising wages but lowering wages. If we don't fight this, it will happen again." It was necessary for a strike vote to be held in the factories.

Burak said he had been working at the factory for eight years. "The agreement is a betrayal. We are getting a wage increase that is not one and does not help in the least to solve our problems. When you consider the millions given to board members and the hundreds of thousands for the department heads and other executives, what we got from the supposed fight is really puny. I think that's how workers feel all over the world. The current system needs to be changed. A few always increase their incomes and the majority always lose more. It can't go on like this. It has to be stopped."

The deal underscores that IG Metall does not represent the interests of workers, but those of the corporations. Its functionaries sit on the company supervisory boards, where they decide on corporate strategies and cutback plans. Their works council representatives ensure there is no resistance in the plants. Their top functionaries work closely with the federal government and business associations within the framework of the corporatist "Concerted Action."

The enormous anger among workers must therefore find a conscious expression. The defence of real wages, jobs and other social gains is only possible in opposition to the union bureaucracy, which has both feet in the enemy camp. The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party) therefore advocates the building of independent rank-and-file action committees to take this task in hand.

We call on workers in the metal and electrical industries: Do not accept the wage settlement! Demand a ballot in which the workers themselves decide! Take the negotiating mandate away from the union bureaucrats, build action committees and prepare real fighting measures!

Contact us by WhatsApp at the following number: +491633378340 or register to build action committees.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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