

Ford Saarlouis: The strikes in France and the fight against plant closure

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At a recent delegate's meeting in the German city of Völklingen, Lars Desgranges of the IG Metall trade union announced that Ford would soon announce new plans for the future of its Saarlouis plant, which is slated for closure. IG Metall was preparing for the announcement, Desgranges said, because “those who fight can lose; those who don't fight have already lost.”

The employees of Ford in Saarlouis already know what this really means: whoever relies on IG Metall has lost already.

When Markus Thal, chairman of the works council at the plant, addressed the workforce at the works meeting last week, he once again talked about “struggle,” “tough negotiations” and “intensive disputes.” Afterwards, Thal and his IG Metall union continued where they left off: working together with the Ford management behind closed doors to keep the workforce quiet, in order to wind down the plant.

It is now essential for workers to take the initiative and wage a serious fight to defend all remaining jobs at the plant. The plant is still standing, production is still running. It is now that a strike and a real struggle must be discussed and organized. Where production is being dismantled, the shop floors must be occupied to prevent the removal of machinery and production equipment.

The strikes, demonstrations and struggles in the streets of France against the pension cuts of the despised Macron government show that it is very possible to wage a serious struggle. Many Ford workers are following the events in France with great sympathy and enthusiasm. Some live in France and are experiencing these struggles firsthand. If it is possible to stand up to Macron, his government and his police in France, then it is also possible to fight in the state of Saarland against a thuggish Ford management and its profit-driven closures.

But this requires two things. First, the works council mafia around Thal, which is closely linked to the management, must be stripped of its authority. Second, it is vitally important to strengthen and build up the Ford Rank-and-File

Committee to take control of the defense of jobs.

A serious struggle to defend the jobs in Saarlouis would inspire millions of workers in the German public sector, the postal service and many other branches who are currently engaged in collective bargaining and organizing warning strikes. The spark of resistance would spread like wildfire from France to Germany.

But that is precisely what the works council and IG Metall seek to prevent. The works council's record is devastating.

Since 2019, Thal and company have agreed to every cut in personnel demanded by management, eliminating 2,600 jobs though year. Last year, in a ruinous bidding war, to keep their respective plants open, Thal and his Spanish colleague José Luís Parra of the UGT union divided the workforces of the Ford plants in Saarlouis and in Almussafes, Spain, and played them off against each other by underbidding one another. IG Metall even offered to cut the wages of all Ford employees in Germany—including those in Cologne—by 18 percent to keep the plant open.

It has been almost exactly nine months since Thal told the approximately 4,600 Ford employees in Saarlouis that the company had decided to close the Saarland plant in 2025.

Since then, he and his works council have prevented any struggle and suppressed opposition in the plant. Even on the day the Saarlouis closure was announced, the works council and IG Metall led the shocked workforce to a prepared, token rally fully two kilometers from the plant so as not to risk a spontaneous gate and plant occupation.

At a safe distance from the plant, Thal, Desgranges and others announced an vague “fight” and warned Ford of the “most expensive plant closure ever.” They followed this up by erecting crosses with festival pageantry and toying with pyrotechnics.

All of this is for show and has absolutely nothing to do with a “fight” to defend the plant and its jobs. Thal and his cronies understand “struggle” to mean nothing more than servile groveling before corporate leaders, whose bidding they perform.

Every time Ford failed to present a promised “future

concept” for the plant, the promise of which Thal used to pacify the workforce, the works council chairman stepped up to the microphone and submissively demanded that the plan be presented by the next meeting at the latest. One can only guess what will or will not be presented to the workforce now.

It should be noted that no investor has yet been found to keep the plant open.

At last week’s works meeting, Thal has now announced that 650 jobs will already be cut in Saarlouis this year, via severance payments, early retirements and transfers to the Cologne plant. After 2025, 1,000 jobs will be “saved.” He did not explain this further.

The rest—around 3,000 workers—will have to find another job by 2025.

Until then, they are to produce the Focus. Due to the actions of IG Metall and the works council, the mood among the workforce has reached a new low. Many have fallen ill and feel unable to work. Some are leaving the plant via partial retirement, others are accepting job offers at Ford in Cologne, and still others—especially the younger ones—have made a quick exit to look for other jobs, even without severance pay.

This in turn is sapping the strength of the remaining workforce. The March works council bulletin stated that the Works Council is also “endeavoring to find solutions” to this issue in “discussions with management.” However, a “holistic concept for the personnel and production situation in 2023” is not yet available (in March, the third month of the year!). It is abundantly clear that Thal is concerned about “the functioning of the plant”—not about the workers.

Meanwhile, Ford’s board members and owners can rest comfortably. The works council is taking care of maintaining production and smoothly destroying jobs until 2025, after which the state of Saarland will take over the plant building and real estate from Ford.

At the beginning of March, the Saarland state government of Anke Rehlinger (Social Democrats, SPD) agreed on a purchase option if the search for investors does not “lead to a complete commercialization of the plant site” by the summer of 2025. The fixed maximum purchase price for this case, which the Saarland would have to pay to Ford (plus ancillary acquisition costs), is up to 95 million euro.

It once again becomes clear that the Ford workforce is confronted with a nothing less than a conspiracy of the corporation, the Saarland SPD government and the IG Metall union including its works council.

Since September of last year, when the company announced that it would close either the German plant in Saarlouis or the Spanish plant in Almussafes, the *World Socialist Web Sitewar*ned that the works councils at both

plants were outbidding each other with cost-cutting offers and “trying to prove to the board of directors that their respective site could produce more profitably than the other.” The losers would be the Ford employees at both plants.

This warning has now been more than confirmed. Ford Spain announced almost a month ago that it would eliminate 1,144 jobs in Almussafes, or 20 percent of the workforce. The unions there immediately signaled their willingness to work with management to push through these layoffs within three months.

Ford Europe had already announced in February that it would cut 3,800 jobs across Europe over the next three years. In Germany—in addition to the 4,600 in Saarlouis—an additional 2,300 jobs are to be eliminated, and 1300 in the UK.

The day the Saarlouis shutdown was announced, the WSWS wrote: “If the workforce in Saarlouis allows the works councils and IG Metall to continue where they have now left off, it will lead to a disaster. The gradual closure of the plant will impact the entire region, leading to a rapid decline in wages and prospects.”

It is now urgent to take the reins out of the hands of Thal and IG Metall. No more putting off workers with “future concepts” and “Ford’s responsibility.” This is the mechanism by which the livelihood of Ford employees is being destroyed. Thal and company are being rewarded for this. They do not need to worry about their futures.

The next works meeting should be the starting point for making contact with Spanish colleagues in Almussafes through the Ford Rank-and-File Committee, which was constituted a year ago to defend jobs. Now is the right moment for action.

We call on Ford colleagues to contact the Ford Action Committee now, via WhatsApp message on this number: +491633378340



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact