

Autoworkers in Germany voice support for Big Three workers in US: “All workers have to pull together”

Our reporters
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Industrial action by US autoworkers at the Big Three—Ford, GM and Stellantis—is gaining recognition and solidarity among autoworkers in Germany. Although the German media have decided to stay silent about the conflict as much as possible, workers at Ford, Mercedes, Volkswagen or Stellantis/Opel are taking a lively interest in the struggle of their American colleagues. All the more so as they themselves are confronted with the same or similar problems.

In recent days, WSWs teams have distributed thousands of flyers at the factory gates of Ford in Cologne, VW in Zwickau, Mercedes-Benz in Ludwigsfelde near Berlin and Opel/Stellantis in Rüsselsheim, with a statement by Will Lehman, a socialist and autoworker from Pennsylvania.

Entitled, “Unite the rank and file for an all-out autoworkers strike!”, Lehman warns against a sellout by the leadership of the UAW auto union under Shawn Fain: “Autoworkers voted 97 percent to authorize a strike last month,” Lehman writes, “but Fain and the bureaucracy are forcing almost 97 percent of the membership to keep working!” Such a strategy, he says, can only mean “companies will win and workers will lose, with hundreds of thousands of jobs eliminated through the transition to EV.”

Lehman’s call to build the International Workers Alliance of Rank and File Committees to “unite with our brothers and sisters in Mexico, Canada and other countries, through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees,” finds a strong basis in the solidarity of autoworkers in Germany. At every plant, there are workers who support their striking colleagues in the United States and want to take an active part in their struggle.

Many agree that the main thing is to prevent strikebreaking in the European plants in the event of widespread industrial action.

Bernard, a Ford worker in Cologne, agreed that no work should be taken on in Cologne to offset the impact of the strike in the US. “That would be the example where I would stand behind it too.” In Rüsselsheim, an “Opelaner” also declared, “We won’t allow strikebreaking here in the plant.” Solidarity with the striking Stellantis colleagues in the USA was “a matter

of course.” Many others say in passing that they have heard little about the strike so far but wish their colleagues “good luck”—“They should hold out!”

An Opel assembly worker said, “I wish them good luck; it’s good what they’re doing, very good!” Mario, a younger Opel worker, agrees: “I hope our American colleagues succeed in their industrial action! It’s just as crappy here. They must not give up.”

At Mercedes-Benz in Ludwigsfelde, a worker said: “Their goals are justified; they should stick to it and keep going.” Another hopes that US workers will hang on even when things get tough, when the union and the government want to push through an outcome “especially in these hard times” that is better for the corporations than for the workers. “You just have to hang in there!” he says.

The autoworkers quickly got to talking about the problems that make life difficult for them in their respective factories here in Germany. What robs them of sleep are problems like inflation, short-time work in the pandemic, the spread of insecure, low-paid temporary work and, above all, the transformation to electric vehicle production (referred to as “e-mobility” in Europe) under capitalist conditions.

In Ludwigsfelde, the more than 2,000 workers at the Mercedes-Benz plant are facing the uncertainty that production of light trucks will be stopped at the end of the decade. “I know a lot of existential fears here at our plant too,” said a Daimler colleague who opposes the fact that “collective bargaining gains are being abolished in the USA.” She adds: “I stand by my colleagues in the USA.”

VW in Zwickau also faces the loss of at least 2,200 jobs when the contracts of temporary workers expire. In the transition to EVs, VW wants to cut thousands of jobs at several locations in cooperation with the IG Metall union. Stefan, one of the temporary workers in Zwickau, says: “I’m not even in IG Metall; I save the money. I never see anyone from IG Metall in the factory. They just want to cash in themselves—and the rich are getting richer and richer.” Stefan thinks that setting up an independent rank-and-file action committee is a good idea.

An older worker confirms these statements, saying: “The

Works Council representatives are released from working on the line and paid more. That's where the corruption starts. They hardly have any relation to us workers anymore." He calculates roughly how many millions of euros all the temporary workers have paid in membership fees over the years—"and now IG Metall won't lift a finger for them."

At Opel in Rüsselsheim, which today belongs to Stellantis, two workers tell the WSWs team: "You should come to the factory and see the lousy conditions. We are just being burnt out."

After hearing about the "two-tier" system in the USA Pedro said, "workers have the same problems everywhere." He himself was only taken on permanently after two years as a temporary worker. His colleague adds: "Here in the factory we only have very few permanent workers. We have become too expensive for them. Stellantis makes billions in profits, but they have more than 40 percent temporary workers in the factory, and we work every other Saturday. A young temporary worker reports that she has been at the plant for five months and says: 'More and more, all the assembly line work is being dumped on us temporary workers.'"

In Rüsselsheim, after several periods of short-time working, the Astra has been produced in two shifts for some time. "Profits are bubbling up," writes the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. Stellantis CEO Carlos Tavares collected no less than €23.5 million last year. All the "bubbling profits" are at the expense of the workers: more than 1,000 of around 2,500 employees are temporary workers, and the works council has even agreed that they can be employed at the factory for up to 36 months—instead of 18 months as before—without a permanent job. There was a protest action in the final assembly line at the plant on July 6 against the extensive temporary work.

At Ford in Cologne, Bernard, a worker, said he feared that "everything might be closed down. Everything will be moved to Romania. At the moment they are pressing here for Craiova, where the parts will then be processed." Even when Ford was closed in Genk, Bernard continued, people asked themselves "whether the union really did everything necessary there."

Body parts for the Ford plant in Craiova, Romania, are being produced at the Cologne press shop. Fiesta production was halted in the summer and the planned launch of the Explorer electric model, which Ford wants to build in cooperation with VW, has been postponed until June 2024. All this is fuelling concerns about renewed short-time work, layoffs, or the closure of entire departments. Already the Ford plants in Genk, Belgium (2012) and Blanquefort, France (2019) have been closed and the fate of Ford-Saarlouis is sealed if the board and IG Metall have their way—but the Ford Action Committee is strongly opposed to this.

"They are now building fully on e-cars. No one really knows at the moment how this will go on," Bernard continued. "At the end of the day, 'time is money', and if it's a standstill here from October to June and we're in here twiddling our thumbs,

then I don't know how that's going to go. Who's going to know? Anything is possible."

Commenting on the fact that in the US 97 percent of union members voted for strike action, but the UAW auto union only called a total of three plants on strike, Bernard says: "If you think about the whole thing, worldwide, not just in the US, then yes, this also affects Ford in Europe. They always advertise with the slogan 'One Ford'—but I don't see 'One Ford'. All workers have to pull together."

On the suggestion that workers unite independently of the union bureaucracy and internationally, Bernard said: "It certainly sounds reasonable. It sounds very reasonable: international." And to his American colleagues in the contract struggle, he urged, "Keep going. Don't hang your heads. Just keep fighting until you make your voices heard, until the others wake up and join in, help and show solidarity. And then we can make a difference worldwide."

Many autoworkers are also concerned about the tense war situation in Ukraine against Russia. In Rüsselsheim, WSWs reporters met Mohsen, a young worker from Afghanistan, who is doing temporary work at Opel. He brought up the war economy, which is the reason why the trade unions are avoiding any industrial action right now. Apparently, this was no different in Germany than in the USA. The fact that the government was pouring oil on the fire with constant arms deliveries and that the union accepts this was "not okay," says Mohsen: "I am completely against war. I fled from the war myself, from Afghanistan."

He did not think highly of the union. "At first I thought about joining IG Metall," Mohsen said. "But in the course of three months, not a single one of them came to see us temporary workers. I don't think they care about us."

The struggle for wages, jobs and livelihoods facing autoworkers in the US, Germany and every country proves that the issue today is to build independent action committees in every plant. That is why the International Committee of the Fourth International has formed the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). This is committed to uniting struggles across national borders and "launching and developing a global working class counter-offensive."

To get actively involved in building action committees, get in touch via Whatsapp message on +49 163-337 8340 or fill out the form below.



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