

Ford Saarlouis: Investor pulls out leaving 6,000 jobs in danger

Peter Schwarz
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Ford's plant in the German city of Saarlouis resembles a slave market. For years, the company, the works council, the union IG Metall and the state government have been haggling behind closed doors over the fate of 6,000 workers and their families as if they were a commodity up for sale. First they played off the workforce in Saarlouis against their colleagues in Valencia, Spain, then they tried to palm off the workforce with a possible investor, kept so secret his or its name has remained undisclosed. Now this bubble has also burst.

On Thursday, the company and its works council announced that the secretive investor had backed out. According to Ford Germany boss Martin Sander, after an "in-depth feasibility study and intensive negotiations," also involving the Saarland state government, the investor had decided not to continue negotiations, adding. "He did not tell us his motives and we have to respect that."

Some 6,000 jobs—4,500 at the Ford plant and 1,500 in the adjacent supplier park—are now on the line. Ford has indicated it will retain just 1,000 workers in a new technology park, although the type of jobs, how much workers will be paid or whether the jobs will ever exist is completely unclear.

The works council has already agreed to the job massacre. "We will now do what we are there for," said works council chair Markus Thal. "We will negotiate conditions for workers losing their jobs."

A works council information sheet distributed on Thursday last week during the factory meeting stated: "It's all about conditions for the loss of the jobs of

2,850 workers. We now have to face the possible new reality."

Negotiations on a social agreement are to start as early as October 9. On the agenda is not the preservation of jobs, but rather the amount of severance pay. "So this step is now about negotiating the conditions for the possible job loss," the works council info-sheet reads.

The works council drones on that: "Ford still has a social responsibility and we will hold them accountable!" In the first place, it's up to: "Ford, to pay up!" The works council even threatens "possible warning strikes" and "indefinite, legal industrial action"—not to defend jobs however, but rather over levels of severance pay.

Anyone who has followed the activities of the Ford works council and IG Metall over the past few years knows what to make of such threats. The union and its work council are quite prepared to stab the workforce in the back as long as their own privileges and salaries are preserved. The works council and IG Metall are doing everything to prevent a real struggle to defend the jobs.

This was also the purpose of the proposal that workers could stay home for two days (with pay) after the works meeting. What was presented by the works council as a concession by the company, in reality served to ensure that angry workers stay out of the factory. They were denied any opportunity to meet together and discuss plans for real industrial action. The works council has so far relied on secret negotiations with the company and will continue to do so.

The works council was closely involved in the negotiations with the mysterious investor behind the backs of the workforce. At the "express request" of the investor, Ford negotiated "future working conditions

with the investor” and the works council, according to its own info-sheet. “In 15 rounds of negotiations over the plant holiday, we negotiated in the past weeks a good concept for future working conditions.” The refusal of the investor then hit the works council “completely unprepared and absolutely surprised.”

It's not hard to imagine what this means. In the bidding competition with Valencia, the works council had already promised the company wage cuts of 18 percent and unpaid overtime amounting to 20 days a year in all German Ford plants. Now it has apparently offered the investor such lucrative working conditions that it was “totally surprised” when the investor turned down the offer. Even after the deal fell through, the company and the works council are still hiding the identity of the investor.

It is suspected, however, it could be a major Chinese car company. The *F.A.Z.* newspaper, which is usually well-informed on economic issues, wrote that according to its sources “it is one of the two leading Chinese electronics manufacturers, either BYD or Chery.”

This raises further questions about the deal falling through. Did the German government veto a deal in order to prevent Chinese investment in Germany as part of its preparations for war against China? Or did Ford's headquarters in Detroit intervene, bearing in mind the company has little interest in strengthening the hand of its Chinese competitors in the highly competitive global market for EVs?

The *Saarbrücker Zeitung*, which has close ties to the state government and IG Metall, suggests the latter. The investor is “closely linked to the car industry” and wants to “conquer the German and European market using the Saarlouis site if possible,” it reported. The problem was above all “the relationship between Ford and the new investor.” There was still no “concrete offer about conditions with which Ford is willing to participate in a transfer of the Ford factory into the hands of the investor.” The paper wrote that the works council, IG Metall and Economics Minister Jürgen Barke (SPD) were furious about this development.

The state government had in the meantime made an “attractive offer” to the investor in an attempt to keep it on board. According to media reports, Barke and Ford representatives flew to China at the weekend for further talks with the investor.

The financial offer of the state government goes “far beyond our limits,” the Saarbrücken newspaper quotes Economics Minister Barke. There is talk of “a financial participation in the order of a medium three-digit million amount.” This would correspond to about one tenth of the annual budget of the highly indebted state of Saarland and would entail further cuts in social spending.

The Ford workforce would also have to make further sacrifices. The construction of a new production site by an Asian car manufacturer would devour “huge sums of money,” writes the *Saarbrücker Zeitung*. No doubt the works council and IG Metall agree and will offer further concessions.

The independent Ford Action Committee has long since warned that there is no red line the works council and IG Metall would not cross. They do not represent the interests of the workforce, but rather they defend the profit margins of the corporation, working closely with top management and the government to achieve this end.

The action committee has rejected the bidding competition with Valencia and proposed joint action with the colleagues in Almussafes. It has called for the withdrawal of the mandate of the works council and insisted that jobs must not be sacrificed to the greed of the group and its shareholders. It advocates industrial action to defend every job and demands the disclosure of the identity of the investor and all secret agreements made. It fights for the international unity of the working class to defend jobs, wages and social gains. The interests of workers must take precedence over the interests of the capitalists.



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