

Warning strikes at Ford in Saarlouis: German auto union seeks to sabotage resistance to plant closure

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On January 17 and 18, the German engineering union, IG Metall and the company works council at the Ford plant in Saarlouis called for brief “warning strikes” to be held in front of the factory gate. Around 1,000 took part. Another warning strike took place last Friday.

To make clear: the limited strikes are an integral part of the plan for the closure of the factory that the works council headed by Markus Thal and IG Metall is implementing on behalf of the company. The aim is to prepare the plant’s remaining 3,850 employees for imminent, massive job cuts, offers of menial alternative jobs and low severance payments.

Immediately after a supposedly serious investor backed out in October last year, Thal and his works council started negotiations on conditions for those workers to be made redundant. Ford had previously promised to finance 1,000 jobs until 2032, with Ford management and the works council sitting together for over three months to negotiate the conditions under which at least 2,850 Ford employees would be made redundant.

Now Thal claims to have realised that the negotiations are “going in the wrong direction.” Allegedly, Ford does not want to pay the often long-serving employees more than has already been agreed in the company’s existing “voluntary programme.” The works council, however, wants to avoid an outcry and protests by offering the carrot of slightly higher severance payments.

Thal explains this quite openly: “The offer presented so far in the social contract bargaining ... is nowhere near enough to achieve a peaceful solution at the site.” Thal’s priority is a “peaceful solution,” i.e., the closure

of the plant—preferably without a squeak from the workforce!

The extension of production until the end of 2025 will probably also serve this goal, with the works council and management currently planning to reduce daily production from 600 vehicles to 520 from April and thus switch to single-shift operation. To achieve this, production will not end in May 2025, but now at a later date. The workforce was informed about this, not from the works council, but rather from a notice posted in a nearby supplier plant. This postponement would push back the final plant closure by a few months, during which time employees would be gradually eased out of the factory.

The works council will also use the question of who will receive one of the 1,000 guaranteed jobs to divide the workforce. Colleagues who dare to rebel will be put under pressure.

Three days ago, Ford boss Martin Sander revealed to the *Kölner Stadtanzeiger* newspaper that the 1,000 jobs are not located in the auto industry, and possibly not even in an industrial company. He confirmed that there would not be a “key investor” from the auto industry. Ford is endeavouring to “attract companies from other industries to the site in order to create as many jobs as possible.”

In plain language, this means that 1,000 Ford employees will be offered jobs at companies with which Ford has possibly reached or will reach an agreement. There are rumours among the workforce that an agreement with a Chinese company will be announced soon.

Be that as it may, when it is announced in the next few weeks which companies will be taking over key

parts of the plant, many of the remaining 2,850 Ford workers and the 1,500 employed in other companies in the neighbouring supplier estate will be left empty-handed.

IG Metall and the works council under Thal know these details but are saying nothing. This is because Thal and his representative on the works council, Holger Michel, as well as the state government, were regularly informed about the status of negotiations by the so-called task force, which spoke to all potential investors, for around a year and a half. Shortly after a major investor backed out in October last year, plant manager Sarah Gielen announced she would be leaving at the end of 2023. Andreas Kreuz, who was previously the chairman of the task force, took over as plant manager in Saarlouis. The company human resources manager had already been replaced by task force member Roman Lauer.

Now these people are sitting together to negotiate the terms of the social contract. What this conspiratorial group has already decided, first in the task force and now in the latest negotiations, is being kept firmly under wraps.

The most important lesson from the past two years goes far beyond Ford: the fight to defend jobs must be directed against the company and its trade union and works council apparatus. IG Metall and the works council are lined up totally with the other side, with the company management.

Ever since Thal, the Ford General Works Council and IG Metall jointly entered the bidding competition against the workers at the Ford plant in Almussafes (Valencia, Spain) at the end of 2021, they have lied to and deceived the workforce. Behind the backs of the more than 4,600 employees at the time—down from 7,000—they initially offered the Ford Group management huge wage cuts and job losses as well as billions in subsidies along with the SPD (Social Democrats) state government of Saarland. All 22,000 employees in all Ford plants in Germany were to receive 18 percent less pay and work an additional 20 days a year—without pay! The investor was to receive up to an additional 5 billion euros in taxpayers' money.

In its first statement almost exactly two years ago, the rank-and-file Ford Action Committee took a clear stance on the bidding competition and warned: “We reject the blackmail and brutal competition between us

and between our sites as a matter of principle. Playing off against one another will only lead to disaster.”

Now the disaster has arrived. When Ford announced in June 2022 that the plant in Saarlouis had lost the competition with other plants and would be closed, IGM and the works council suppressed calls for industrial action and encouraged hopes that a new investor would step in and continue to run the plant.

In the meantime, jobs have been continuously wiped out. Currently, only 3,850 people are still employed at the plant in Saarlouis and around 1,500 in neighbouring companies in the supplier estate. This total of more than 5,300 jobs at Ford and its suppliers is now in acute danger.

If the IG Metall works council under Thal is not finally countered, the fight to defend jobs will be lost. Time is pressing but it is not too late. In the US, the UAW (United Auto Workers) union enforced a miserable contract on car workers—including colleagues at Ford—in its last wage negotiations. The only reason there was no rebellion against the contract was because promises were made to the preserve jobs and the hiring of temporary workers.

Now the temporary workers are being made redundant and a rebellion is developing against the UAW and its false promises. Action committees are preparing a struggle.

In other countries too, such as Turkey, car workers are fighting against job cuts, miserable working conditions and low wages. In Germany, a new wave of attacks is on the horizon at VW, Opel, Bosch, ZF, Mahle, tire manufacturers and many other smaller companies. The workers at Ford in Saarlouis must unite with these colleagues worldwide through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

Send a WhatsApp message to +491633378340. Become active and help build the Ford Action Committee!



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