

Works Council and IG Metall union seal plant closure at Ford Saarlouis in Germany

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Last Thursday, the works council and IG Metall union invited the remaining 3,750 employees at the soon-to-close Ford Saarlouis plant to a factory meeting with only one item on the agenda: the vote on a so-called “social contract” the union bureaucracy had negotiated.

Far from preventing the closure of the plant, the agreement sanctions the shutdown of the factory, which has been a critical source of employment in the southwest German region, next to the border with France, for more than half a century. At the time Ford announced the closure of the plant, about two years ago, more than 6,000 employees worked at the Saarlouis plant and adjacent supplier companies.

The agreement chiefly involves redundancy packages, along with hollow promises that some workers will remain employed in auxillary positions after the factory stops car production.

Following last week’s vote, IG Metall officials celebrated, issuing a hypocritical statement, titled “Saarlouis must live!—Gigantic approval of 93.28 percent.” Union officials, perhaps saying more than they intended, declared, “Our fight over the past months and years has paid off.”

There is little doubt that the suppression of any strike action to stop the closure of the plant has “paid off” well for union and works council officials, such as Markus Thal. For the workers, their families and the entire region, however, it has been a disaster. Auto production will be phased out by the end of November 2025 and some 5,000 jobs will be lost. After December 2025, Ford is only “guaranteeing” 1,000 jobs through 2032.

In other words, the result of the “fight” by the works council and IG Metall is that Ford Saarlouis is dead!

From the beginning, the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Ford Action Committee, set up by rank-and-file workers, warned that this would be the outcome of the bidding war between IG Metall and the General Union of Workers (UGT) over where Ford would locate electric vehicle production. The union bureaucracies played off workers in Saarlouis and Almussafes, Spain, against each other and offered management huge wage concessions, the details of which have been concealed to this day. The outcome has been wage cuts, layoffs and plant closures.

The Ford Action Committee explained that jobs would not be

defended by IG Metall and its works council but only through a rank-and-file rebellion against the bureaucrats that stand on the side of the corporation.

After Ford announced that Saarlouis would be closed, the works council and IG Metall systematically demobilised the workforce to make the closure possible. They held back the workers, sought to placate them and occasionally ordered them to the gates for toothless protests in limited numbers to allow workers to blow off steam.

Then Thal, the IG Metall and Saarland state executive strung the workforce along with promises of an “investor” who supposedly wanted to take over the entire plant. Everyone involved kept quiet about who the supposed investor was. Now, broadcaster *Saarländer Rundfunk* has revealed that the Chinese state-owned company Chery Automobile was the major investor. Chery officials have not denied the report.

In October 2023, however, the company and the works council announced that the secretive investor had pulled out, with Ford Germany boss Martin Sander saying talks collapsed after an “in-depth feasibility study and intensive negotiations,” involving the Saarland state government.

In the run-up to the final closure announcement, the works council and IG Metall organised short strikes in mid-January, ostensibly to improve the terms of the “social contract.” In reality, the phony strikes were the final nail in the coffin.

The closure of the historic factory is the result of the rigged game the works council, IG Metall, Social Democratic (SPD) state government and company officials have played against rank-and-file workers for over two years.

To ensure the ratification of their “social contract,” these forces sought to deceive workers by holding a “strike ballot.” But the only alternatives were an indefinite strike, which workers knew the works council and union would sabotage, or the acceptance of a deal whose details were concealed from workers. To make matters worse, union officials declared that 75 percent of the workforce would have to vote against it for the proposal to be defeated.

The works council and IG Metall were reportedly unsure if this shotgun vote would work. Then suddenly they announced that it had been approved by over 93 percent of the workforce. Most workers could not believe the official results, given the

widespread opposition.

But IG Metall has made it impossible to check the validity of the vote. There was no list of those authorised to vote to compare with the actual votes cast. Anyone with an authorisation notice issued by the IG Metall and sent by post was allowed to vote.

There was no rank-and-file oversight to determine if votes were valid or if someone voted multiple times. The ballot boxes were not publicly checked beforehand, or secured by committees of workers. Only officials from the works council knew what was in them.

Workers have long accused IG Metall and works council officials of vote fraud in internal elections and contract votes. The large “yes” vote last Thursday is not particularly different from the last works council election results, or for that matter, votes in the Stalinist former East Germany, where the hated ruling party always received an overwhelming majority.

Even if a majority of workers voted for the deal, it was not an endorsement of the IG Metall and its rotten deal. After two years of constant fears over their fate, it is possible a majority of workers reluctantly voted for the deal to “end the horror” rather than prolong it, especially since IG Metall and works council officials demonstrated they would do nothing to stop the plant closure.

Workers reported that the atmosphere at the factory meeting was like a funeral. They felt forced—by the trade union and works council—to rubber-stamp their own job losses.

And they did so without knowing exactly what they were voting on. Workers will only find out what the specific individual consequences will be for them later this month. They will either receive a redundancy offer or be told if they are being considered for one of the remaining 1,000 jobs after 2025.

Not many more than these jobs will be created in the long term, no matter how loudly the works council, union and SPD talk about “replacement jobs” and new investors. This became clear immediately after the result of the vote was announced.

State Minister of Economic Affairs Jürgen Barke immediately presented journalists with grand plans for the Ford plant and the entire 120-hectare site with its huge halls and areas. But on closer inspection, it was clear these were just castles in the air, much like the long-touted major investor.

After 2025, a 10-hectare “winter car park” at the plant facility is supposed to be redeveloped. Until now, cars produced in winter have been parked there before being delivered to dealers. From 2026 on—by which time the plant will already be closed—a further 15 hectares are to be redeveloped and built on. The aim is to attract smaller companies with 100 to 300 employees each.

The demand for this was very high, says Barke. However, it remains to be seen how many companies will actually settle there. Allegedly, letters of intent have been received from some companies. As usual, their names are not being mentioned nor

is there any information of the wages and conditions workers will face.

But one thing is clear: in 2026—apart from the site where Ford is financing 1,000 jobs—tens of hectares of the 120-hectare site will lie empty. Only one-fifth—25 hectares in total—will be “redeveloped.” The supposed replacement jobs will be a long time coming—if they come at all.

However, SPD Minister Barke was just as euphoric as IG Metall and works council chairman Thal. For further planning on the Ford site, the social contract was “a liberating blow,” Barke claimed.

Fundamental lessons must be learned from the experiences of the last two years, both at Ford and in the automotive industry. Before the vote, the WSWS made it clear: “There is no individual way out of the crisis. A common struggle in defence of all jobs is necessary and can no longer be postponed. That is why the establishment of the independent action committee is so important.”

The redundancies and plant closure plans at Ford are just the beginning, the article noted. “A job massacre is unfolding in the auto industry the likes of which the sector has not seen since the Second World War.” Major class struggles were inevitable, “which will go far beyond the current warning strikes and break through the control of the trade union apparatus.”

Workers at Bosch, Continental, ZF, BASF and many other companies are facing an escalating wave of job cuts, along with workers across the world, and a unified fight is necessary. But this fight must be organized independently of and in opposition to the works council reps and trade union bureaucrats, and coordinated across borders through the expansion of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

Workers at Ford, the auto industry and beyond should take concrete action to set up rank-and-file action committees. To contact the Ford Action Committee, send a WhatsApp message to the following number: +491633378340 or fill out the following form!



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact