25,000 protest against mass redundancies at Bosch in Germany

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Over 25,000 Bosch employees protested across Germany last week against the planned massive job cuts at the company. More than 10,000 gathered outside the company headquarters in Gerlingen near Stuttgart. Workers from the neighbouring Mercedes-Benz plants in Untertürkheim and Sindelfingen as well as from Mahle and other companies also soldarized with their colleagues at Bosch and joined the protest.

It was the largest protest at Bosch in thirty years and is an expression of the growing anger of hundreds of thousands of workers in the automotive and supplier industry who fear for their jobs. Further protests with some 15,000 total participants took place in Ansbach, Blaichach, Bamberg, Eisenach, Hildesheim, Homburg, Nuremberg and Salzgitter.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to several workers who are worried about their jobs, their families, and their future. They were thoughtful and angry and had come to the rally to express their opposition. But the IG Metall trade union, as usual, used whistles and flags to ensure the protest remained loud and superficial.

Frank Sell, Chairman of the General Works Council of the Mobility business sector and Deputy Chairman of the Bosch Supervisory Board, claimed that management were refusing to even talk to the union. “We are still at the very beginning of the transformation [to EVs]. If this is the direction we are heading in, things look bleak for the next few years,” he said.

The protests were triggered by the drip feed of announcements from Bosch management that more than 3,500 workers would be made redundant at several plants across the country. In recent years, 4,000 employees across the group had already lost their jobs.

IG-Metall, which has already agreed to the redundancies, had called for a protest in order to defuse the growing resistance in the plants. In the automotive and supplier industry, IG-Metall plays a leading role in implementing the transformation process from internal combustion engines to EVs in the interests of the corporations. It helps to organise the destruction of jobs in order to maximise company profits.

In July 2023, IG-Metall announced that following “difficult” negotiations, it had agreed a collective agreement that excluded “compulsory redundancies” for 80,000 employees in the mobility sector until the end of 2027. “Employees are helping to shape the future at Bosch Mobility,” rejoiced the union at the time.

The agreement was reached after long protests by workers against the reorganisation plans drawn up by management and IG-Metall. Although the details of the agreed concessions were kept secret by the union, it laid the foundation for the announcement of a new wave of redundancies in January 2024.

The formula “no compulsory redundancies” is always used as a fig leaf to mislead workers and implement management’s hidden plans with the help of the trade unions.

Christoph Geismar, from broadcaster *SWR*, commented on the future collective agreement at the time with the words: “It’s actually quite simple, they want to bring calm to the workforce. I think that without the agreements that have now been reached, there would have been more and more protests and resentment among employees. And Bosch cannot afford that in the company’s most important division.”

Works Council Chairman Frank Sell announced that the future collective agreement not only guarantees jobs: “More importantly, the works council representatives will now also be involved in strategic and economic planning at an early stage, for example with regard to the location of future products and the development of objectives. In this way, we are shaping the future of the German mobility production locations beyond 2027.”

The global market for EVs is not developing as expected. With the exception of luxury models at exorbitant prices, the automotive industry continues to mainly produce vehicles with combustion engines.

Bosch CEO Stefan Hartung recently said that the company would continue to manufacture products for combustion engines until at least 2060. Despite the company’s commitment to electromobility, “we must continue to provide combustion engine technology in Germany, otherwise the world will not be able to cope with it.”

The automotive and supplier industry sees the move to EVs as an opportunity for mass redundancies and the dismantling of gains for which workers have fought for generations.

The Bosch Group employs 133,800 people in Germany and 427,600 worldwide. As one of the leading international technology companies, Bosch has 468 production facilities and

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offices in 60 countries. For the 2023 financial year, the company has increased its sales by 8 percent to €91.6 billion and thus increased its operating profit from €3.8 billion to €4.6 billion.

Chief Financial Officer Markus Forschner reacted to the results with the words: “The headwind remains, which is why we will only achieve our target return with a delay.” The target return is 7 percent.

In an interview with the *Stuttgarter Zeitung*, Bosch CEO Stefan Hartung made clear that the company was planning further mass redundancies. As the company was pursuing a long-term perspective, it would take years to adapt to developments, he said. It may not be possible to achieve this goal with the announced staff reductions, in which case a solution would be found with the employee representatives, he added.

Hartung went on, “These are not final figures, but rather the orders of magnitude that we consider necessary in order to close the competitive gap. At the end of the day, it’s about permanent cost reduction and increasing competitiveness and not about headcounts.”

Banners were carried at the demonstration, recalling the social commitments of company founder Robert Bosch. One banner read: “Robert come back! We need you now!” Such a demand is either naive or fuels illusions. In the midst of the global capitalist crisis, in which the imperialist powers are risking a nuclear world war to secure raw materials and markets, workers cannot expect social commitments from the employers.

Despite his social commitments, Bosch was a right-wing social democrat and capitalist. In response to a strike at the Bosch metalworks in Feuerbach, he closed the plant in March 1913 and sacked 3,700 workers. Today’s Bosch CEO Stefan Hartung also refers to the company founder: “No sacrifice should be spared for a powerful development of the company into the future; the founder gave us this conviction in addition to his social convictions.”

What the workers at Bosch and elsewhere need is to break out of the trade union straitjacket and form independent rank-and-file action committees to fight for their demands.

If IG Metall and the works council now claim they were “surprised” by the new cutback plans, they are lying. Bosch Labour Director Stefan Grosch confirmed to the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* that they were in close contact with the management: “We have been in constant talks since the summer and are adhering to all agreements.”

The union and works council representatives are not concerned with the fate of the workers and their families. They want the company to involve them even more in the planning and implementation of the “transformation.” At the rally, they literally begged company management to rely on them.

Barbara Resch, District Manager of IG Metall Baden-Württemberg, called on the Bosch Executive Board to “talk to us about the future of the German sites. We expect joint answers and efforts to shape the future together.” The IG Metall website states that the transformation to EV production must be “shaped together with the employees [meaning the union], not against them— according to the guiding principle: ‘You don’t build the future alone, you shape it together.’”

In interviews with the WSWS, workers expressed scepticism about the future development of the company.

Teresa and Tim, who are in their second year of training as mechatronics engineers, said they would not be taken on after their apprenticeship. Fifty-five others with a similar apprenticeship would not be taken on either. When they started as apprentices at Bosch, they were enthusiastic and hopeful. Now it was uncertain how their professional lives would develop, they said. They found out only in July 2023, after signing the future collective agreement, that they would not be offered a job, said Tim. He believes they are the first victims of this agreement, which was trumpeted as a “success” for the employees.

Yasar, who works at Mercedes Benz in Untertürkheim, said he had come for two reasons. Firstly, his mother had worked at Bosch for 40 years, so it was also a part of his life. Secondly, the situation for workers at Bosch was very difficult, as far as he knew from the media, and he wanted to express his solidarity: “We are all facing similar difficulties and uncertainties. In the industry, it is unpredictable what will happen next month. There is always a tense atmosphere in the department where I work.”

Thomas, who works as an engineer at Bosch Abstatt, reported that he initially thought things were different at Bosch because it was a foundation and not a public limited company. He said he knew that industry and companies were profit-orientated, but in recent years the profit motive seems to have gained the upper hand at Bosch. Many of his fellow workers had lost or would lose their jobs. Concerns are high among the 6,000-strong workforce and nobody knew what will happen, he said.

Oliver has worked at Bosch Waiblingen for more than 35 years. He was a member of IG Metall in the early years but was not attending the protest as a representative of union. He said he did not want to talk about IG Metall. Although no redundancies were currently planned in his company, his presence here was necessary to support his colleagues. He had taken leave and organised his own travel. In his opinion, his colleagues should be more active.

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