

Steelworkers' protest in Duisburg

Germany: IG Metall union organizes job cuts

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On Tuesday, several thousand steelworkers demonstrated in front of the main Thyssenkrupp plant in the north of Duisburg, Germany. Their union, IG Metall, brought them there from all Thyssenkrupp sites in North Rhine-Westphalia, and from Hüttenwerke Krupp Mannesmann (HKM) in the south of the city of Duisburg.

IG Metall and its works councils, supported by the federal and state governments, made it unmistakably clear to the workers that they support the destruction of thousands of jobs. This is the real meaning of the motto “Future instead of layoffs,” the slogan for the event.

When Supervisory Board Chairman Sigmar Gabriel and the management hinted in February and March that up to 5,000 jobs could be cut, IG Metall and the works council reacted immediately. They agreed to the job cuts; they merely wanted to have a say in how it was done. Tekin Nasikkol, the former head of the Steel Works Council and now head of the Group General Works Council, reiterated that he would “not allow” the exclusion of compulsory redundancies to be changed until March 2026.

More than half of the 179,000 jobs in the German steel industry have been destroyed with this mechanism since German reunification in 1990. Not a single job has been lost through compulsory redundancies. On the contrary, every decision to close plants and cut jobs was signed by IG Metall.

Detlef Wetzel, the former IG Metall boss and deputy chairman of the supervisory board of Thyssenkrupp Stahl, has already announced plans to ultimately agree a further waiver of compulsory redundancies, when another “future agreement” has assured the reduction of thousands of jobs. IG Metall and its works councils wish to sell this as another success.

Many workers the Socialist Equality Party (SGP)

spoke to at the rally were worried about their jobs.

Mehmet from Thyssenkrupp in Hohenlimburg wants to keep his job. “We all have to stick together,” said the process engineer, who came with other young colleagues. “No one can do this on his own.”

His colleague Emin emphasized that he was there because he wants to fight for his future. “We can’t put up with this,” he said. “More and more jobs are being cut, that’s why I’m here.” However, he fears that he will go home “without finding out what happens next.”

The uncertainty among HKM employees is particularly great. They don’t know what is coming.

Hassan is one of over 3,000 steelworkers who are facing an uncertain future. He has worked as a structural steel fitter and welder at the steelworks for 32 years. The owners of HKM are Thyssenkrupp Stahl (50 percent), Salzgitter Stahl (30 percent) and the French group Valourec (20 percent). Since the French company announced its intention to withdraw completely from Germany following the closure of its tube plants in Düsseldorf and Mülheim/Ruhr (formerly Mannesmann), there has been great concern among HKM employees that the plant will be shut down.

HKM was created by the merger of the Krupp steelworks in the Rheinhausen district of Duisburg and the Mannesmann plant in the Hüttenheim district at the end of 1987. Krupp Rheinhausen was closed in 1993 after a long and fierce labor dispute, which was betrayed by IG Metall at the time.

Since then, the IG Metall functionaries have turned into direct and well-paid henchmen of the company management and shareholders. This was indirectly the reason for the protest outside the steelworks.

Originally, the works council had invited 10,000 of Thyssenkrupp’s 27,000 employees and around a third of HKM’s workforce of over 3,000 to an internal

works council meeting at the MSV stadium.

The plans were then changed on short notice. Instead of an internal meeting, there was a public protest in front of the main administration building of the parent plant. The reason given was that the Czech billionaire Daniel Kretinsky was acquiring a 20 percent stake in the Thyssenkrupp steel group. Ultimately, his stake is to grow to 50 percent and the steel division is to be separated from the industrial group. Negotiations between Thyssenkrupp and Kretinsky's investment company EP Global Commerce (EPGC) have been ongoing for eight months.

Just as it agreed to the job cuts, IG Metall has already agreed to the billionaire joining the company. Group Works Council Chairman Nasikkol stated to journalists in Duisburg at the beginning of September last year: "We have nothing against billionaires. If they invest the money in steel, we are happy."

What has now upset Nasikkol and his entourage in the works and supervisory councils is that Thyssenkrupp CEO Miguel López did not involve them sufficiently when Kretinsky joined the company. IG Metall claims that they were only informed of the first deal four hours before the public found out about it.

IG Metall and its works councils are not troubled by the deal as such. They are, rather, worried about their own sweet deal. When the union officials first met with Kretinsky and his people over six months ago, they presented them with a list of demands and questions. From IG Metall's point of view, the main issues to be clarified were whether the steel division would continue to be based in Germany after a takeover by Kretinsky and whether Thyssenkrupp would retain a long-term stake in it.

After all, this is the basis for co-determination, the legally regulated corruption of the trade unions in Germany. A lot of money is at stake for union officials. The works councils and union supervisory boards receive high pay, up to six-figure sums per year. Anyone who manages to be appointed by IG Metall as a labor director on the management board—like Dieter Kroll, Ralph Labonte, Dirk Sievers, Markus Grolms, Oliver Burkhard, or Carsten Laakmann and Peter Gasse at HKM—has hit the jackpot. There are millions in it.

In addition to the melding of the trade union and the company, numerous Social Democrat (SPD) politicians are involved, who—like former party chairman and

foreign minister Sigmar Gabriel—sit on the supervisory boards. Yesterday, Federal Minister of Labor Hubertus Heil and Bundestag (parliament) President Bärbel Bas (both Social Democrats, SPD) spoke to the steelworkers and demanded clear information for the employees. Bas sits on the supervisory board of HKM and is therefore well informed about all developments.

One worker, who chose to speak anonymously, pointed out that the brother of works council head Nasikkol had been recalled from Dubai by CEO López in order to trim the company for profit. Cetin Nazikkol, who is two years older than López (and has not Germanized his surname), has been working for Thyssenkrupp as a manager abroad for over 20 years, for a long time in Turkey and most recently in Dubai. He has been chief transformation officer since last year.

While this has "more than a bad aftertaste" for the worker, Tekin Nasikkol waved off questions from journalists at the time. He did not see any issues of conflict with his brother "at the moment."

Obviously, the role played by IG Metall heretofore and its open corruption deterred many workers from taking part in the protest at all. Thirty thousand steelworkers had been invited and 10,000 were expected, but in the end several thousand fewer turned up.

Many workers were interested in the Socialist Equality Party's perspective of organizing those workers who really want to fight to keep their jobs into action committees that are independent of the union. "Very nice perspective," as Emin put it. Hassan from HKM is determined to attend the International May Day Online Rally on Saturday, May 4, where representatives from around the world will present a perspective for the struggle against war and social devastation.



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