

Factory meeting initiates closure of the Ford plant in Saarlouis, Germany

Dietmar Gaisenkersting
11 July 2024

At the factory meeting at Ford in Saarlouis on July 10, the works council, chaired by Markus Thal, initiated the closure of the plant, which once employed over 7,000 workers.

The closure contains important lessons for the working class beyond Ford and the automotive industry. Jobs and wages can only be defended if Ford workers join forces with their colleagues in other plants and companies—in independent rank-and-file action committees and against the IG Metall, which leads the works council.

The union and its works council representatives are the ones enforcing plant closures and mass redundancies—with early retirement, partial retirement and severance schemes or so-called “transfer companies.”

These were also part of the “social contract” that IG Metall presented to the 3,750 Ford employees in Saarland for approval in February. In the meantime, around 2,700 workers have signed at least preliminary agreements that regulate the conditions under which they will finally leave the plant. The 1,800 jobs at the 11 plants in the Ford supplier park will then also be destroyed.

From the end of 2025, only 1,000 employees will remain at Ford itself; 1,050 workers have applied for these 1,000 jobs. What will happen to the surplus of 50 colleagues remains to be seen.

Ford has announced that it will finance these 1,000 jobs until 2032. However, it is unclear to what extent this commitment will be honoured. The entire future of Ford in Europe is in question.

Initially, plastics production for other Ford plants is to be continued. Saarlouis is the only Ford plant in the world to have bumper production (injection moulding) and Boron production (hot pressing).

The slimmed-down plant will be closed for good in 2032, possibly even earlier. This is because the pharmaceutical company Vetter will begin building a production facility on the current Ford plant site in 2026, which is expected to employ up to 2,000 people by 2030. It is therefore quite possible that Ford will finally withdraw from Saarland before 2032.

Nevertheless, Works Council Chairman Thal announced that all “colleagues have a future.” That is one of his many lies. In reality, he and IG Metall have destroyed the future of many thousands of Ford workers and their families.

Given the experience of the last five years, especially the last two to three years, it is time to take stock and draw the necessary conclusions.

Since 2019, Ford has been closing entire plants in Europe, the US, Brazil, Russia and India. The works councils and trade unions have always done everything in their power to ensure that resistance to this has come to nothing.

In the bidding war between the plants in Saarlouis and in Almussafes (Valencia, Spain) from autumn 2021, they played the two workforces off against each other and offered management huge wage concessions, the details of which have been kept secret to this day.

When it was announced two years ago that the plant in Saarlouis was to be closed, the works council and trade union did everything they could to prevent a serious fight in defence of the plant and the jobs. The workforce was systematically demobilised to make the closure possible. Toothless protests in well-measured quantities served above all to deflect the anger of the workforce.

Thal, IG Metall and the Saarland state government dictated that the workforce put all their hopes in an investor who supposedly wanted to take over the entire plant. In October 2023, this hope vanished into thin air.

Hectic preparations then began for the final announcement of the closure. To this end, the works council and IG Metall organised short protest strikes in mid-January 2024 in favour of a “social contract,” i.e., the terms of the final closure.

The plant closure that has now been initiated and the destruction of thousands of jobs is the result of this set-up that the works council, trade union, Social Democratic Party (SPD) state government and company have been playing for almost three years.

IG Metall and its works council reps were only able to push through the closure of the plant because they used mafia-like methods to suppress all opposition. The claim that

there was no possibility of defending the plant and jobs was false from the outset. It was the position of the union apparatchiks who sit on the Ford supervisory board and—just like management—put profits above the rights and interests of the employees.

The Ford Action Committee, which was formed on the initiative of the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS), opposed this conspiracy from the outset and presented a perspective in defence of the plant.

In its first statement in January 2022, the action committee wrote: “We strongly reject claims by the works councils that there is no alternative to the blackmail of the intra-company bidding war and to wage and social cuts. In reality, all the rights and social achievements won by workers—be it the eight-hour day, the regulated wage system, paid holidays, sick pay, safety at work and much more—were fought for in the common struggle of all workers against the capitalists.”

A new political orientation was therefore necessary to resist the blackmail by management and the works council; one based on the common interests of all workers at all sites and opposed to the logic of the capitalist profit system.

Even back then, the action committee warned that the intra-plant bidding war would only produce losers. This has also proved to be true. In the Almussafes plant, where 9,300 were employed before the bidding war, only 3,200 are to remain after what is now the third round of redundancies. The Spanish trade union UGT (Unión General de Trabajadores) and the works council it dominates are no different from IG Metall in Germany. Another 1,600 jobs are currently being cut in Valencia; 600 employees will have to go, while a further 1,000 are being put off with a possible “transitional solution” or an option to return when production of a new hybrid model starts in 2027. However, this is just as vague as Ford’s future in Europe in general.

It is already clear that Ford’s e-mobility targets will not be achieved, just like those of other major manufacturers. The main European and US manufacturers, with the exception of Tesla, are now lagging behind in terms of technology and will find it difficult to catch up.

In an interview with the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, sociologist Klaus Dörre reports rather casually about a conversation with Ford works council members who told him: “We had a BYD [EV] taken apart and had to realise that we don’t understand the technology.”

This is why the Asian manufacturers can also offer cheaper vehicles. The electric Ford Explorer, whose production has just started in Cologne, has a base price of €53,500. The basic version of the Fiesta, production of which was discontinued there last summer, costs just over €20,000. The cheapest Focus, which will roll off the production line in Saarlouis next year, costs €32,000 without

extras.

As a result, there is now a real danger that Ford will withdraw completely from Europe. In Cologne, several thousand jobs are to be lost again, in administration, development and also in production.

Ford workers in Cologne, but also in Almussafes, the UK, Romania and Turkey, must draw the necessary conclusions from the betrayal of their colleagues in Saarlouis.

Set up action committees independent of IG Metall and the other trade unions! Get in touch with each other and join forces. Also contact workers in other companies. The redundancies and plant closures at Ford are just the beginning. A jobs massacre is unfolding in the auto and supplier industry, the likes of which the sector has not seen since the Second World War. Just yesterday, Volkswagen announced that it is likely to close its plant in Brussels, which employs 3,000, due to weak demand for its Audi Q8 e-tron luxury electric car.

Every job must be defended unconditionally.

The basis of the struggle must be what workers need to live and not what the capitalists think they can get away with. The myth of a lack of money must be rejected. Hundreds of billions are being spent on armaments, the war in Ukraine and the genocide in Gaza; they must be invested in jobs, wages and social infrastructure.

A common struggle in defence of all jobs is necessary and must no longer be postponed.

Draw the lessons from the Ford-Saarlouis experience and send a WhatsApp message to the following number: +491633378340 and fill in the form below.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact