

Ford workers in Cologne vote for all-out strike as IG Metall tries to slam on the brakes

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Last week, around 11,500 workers at the Ford plant in Cologne, Germany voted overwhelmingly in favour of an indefinite strike, with 93.5 percent of IG Metall union members backing a walkout. In view of the 97.5 percent turnout, this is a strong signal that Ford workers are prepared to fight for their jobs.

The IG Metall bureaucracy, however, did not organise the ballot to defend jobs; it wants to use the vote exclusively to strengthen its position in the negotiations on a so-called “social contract,” which it has been discussing with management since 27 March.

Such “social contracts” do not prevent plant closures or job cuts, but ensure they are carried out smoothly. IG Metall officials have agreed to every job cut in the past and will continue to do so in the future. Just over five years ago, some 20,000 employees still worked at Ford in Cologne, now only just over half of them remain. The company is currently calling for a further 2,900 jobs to be cut, even though the previously agreed redundancies have not yet been fully implemented.

The leading IG Metall official in Cologne-Leverkusen, Kerstin Klein, also made it clear that the union does not want to strike: “Ford has to move now—*otherwise* [!] we will go through with it.” IG Metall at Ford in Cologne has never called for work stoppages after a ballot. It has always reached an agreement with the company right beforehand.

The demand for a “social contract” for all employees, not just the 2,900 currently affected, shows that the works council and union are preparing for the plant’s closure. In March, the WSWs warned: “The Ford workforce in Cologne should be alarmed. The start of negotiations on a social contract in Saarlouis was the definitive end for the plant.”

The plant in Saarlouis has already been wound up by IG Metall and its works council together with Ford management. Production of the Focus model will be discontinued in November. There were also isolated protest actions and strikes there and even more pithy slogans with which IG Metall officials and works council head Markus Thal feigned their “readiness to fight” while behind the scenes they agreed to the plant closure with the company management.

Now it is Cologne’s turn. The Explorer and Capri electric models produced there are selling poorly. As long as the

closure of the plant in Saarlouis had not been finalised, the Cologne workforce was placated with investments of almost two billion euros. Now it turns out that the Cologne plant is no safer than the one in Saarlouis.

The Chairman of the General Works Council, Benjamin Gruschka, who worked closely with Thal on the closure of the Saarlouis plant, warned two months ago that the German Ford-Werke GmbH (Ford Germany) could become insolvent. The American parent company had cancelled an agreement in place since 2006 to compensate for the losses of its fully owned subsidiary in Europe, the so-called letter of comfort. Insolvency would mean the loss of more than ten thousand jobs.

Gruschka, who as a member of the Supervisory Board of Ford-Werke is well informed about internal company affairs, did not warn of insolvency in order to mobilise the workforce to defend jobs. On the contrary, IG Metall and the works council under its leadership would welcome the partial or complete takeover of the Ford plant by outside investors no matter how many jobs were lost. Ford is already looking for buyers for part of the site, which will no longer be needed after the switch to electric vehicle production.

Financial speculators, such as the Swiss venture capital investor Arclif Group, want to take over the entire plant. Arclif boss Neoklis Lazanas told the *Kölner Stadtanzeiger* that he wanted to realise a “major recycling project.” For the time being, however, Ford’s German management has declined.

According to broadcaster WDR, the transformation of the Opel plant in Bochum is a model for the Ford works councils in Cologne. The plant was closed and demolished in 2015, and the remaining 3,300 jobs were destroyed. An “industrial park” was created on the ruins of the plant, similar to the one that is now to be built on the former Ford plant site in Saarlouis.

Opel—taken over by Stellantis in 2021—still operates a newly built European central warehouse in Bochum with around 800 employees. A DHL logistics centre employs a similar number. Several hundred drivers and warehouse staff work there receiving lower wages than previously at Opel. Most of the 6,000 new jobs on the former Opel plant site are in smaller, highly specialised companies—including VW Infotainment, Bosch and numerous university-related institutes and start-ups.

IG Metall would also have no objection if the defence industry were to bid for the Ford plant and its members were to produce weapons of destruction instead of cars in the future. Last month, a Franco-German consortium set up shop in Cologne to realise the construction of “the combat system of the future,” the Main Ground Combat System (MGCS).

In January, German Defence Minister Boris Pistorius and his French counterpart Sébastien Lecornu founded the MGCS Project Company together with defence giants Rheinmetall, Thales and KNDS. KNDS is a merger between the German company Krauss-Maffei Wegmann and its French competitor Nexter. The new project company, based in Cologne, has initially been endowed with 100 billion euros. Speculation is now rife as to whether production will be located on the Ford plant site.

IG Metall has repeatedly emphasised that it supports the German government’s pro-war policy and the conversion of the industry to war production. Most recently, it used the nationwide union action day on 15 March to demonstrate its enthusiasm for war.

The nationalism that was spewed there divides Ford employees from their colleagues around the world and is ultimately aimed at stirring them up against each other in war.

Ford is a company with headquarters in the USA and almost 50 production sites in more than a dozen countries on four continents. Its plants in Australia were closed in 2016. Clearly, an international strategy and cooperation is needed in the fight against the company.

But this cooperation must come from the workers. The proclamations of solidarity from union and works council officials published by the Ford works council in Cologne are pathetic lies. They are designed to cover up the fact that the national trade union apparatuses are siding with their respective governments and playing the workforce off against each other.

Or does anyone believe the Spanish UGT from the Almussafes Ford plant when it writes that it is “convinced that the unity and determination of the workers is the key to defending our rights and the future of our jobs”? The UGT and IG Metall had played the Almussafes and Saarlouis workforces off against each other by submitting to the internal bidding war. This first led to the end of the Saarlouis plant and is now leading to the foreseeable end of Almussafes.

The trade union bureaucrats at the Ford Otosan plant in Craiova, Romania, wrote in their solidarity address that it was important “to take account of the changes in the automotive industry in a fair and equitable manner without jeopardising jobs.”

The most audacious message was sent by Chuck Browning, Vice President of the United Auto Workers (UAW). In his short video, he claims: “We stand with you because your fight is our fight. The solidarity of the working class knows no borders.”

What a hoax. His boss, UAW president Shawn Fain, has demonstratively backed US President Donald Trump’s

“America First” policy and punitive tariffs, which are in preparation for war, especially against China. Fain claims that the White House fascist’s tariff policy protects American jobs.

In a recent interview with *Jacobin*, Fain called tariffs a “national security issue” and said when “we eliminate our manufacturing base in this country, we’re going to be in big trouble if we have to defend ourselves.... the way that World War II was won when the United States got involved was, we utilized the excess capacity at our auto plants in this country to build bombers, to build tanks, to build jeeps.”

These goals—armaments production and war—are supported by the trade union apparatuses in every country.

The struggles against war and against the mass destruction of jobs are therefore directly linked. In order to wage them, it is necessary to organise independently—of IG Metall and its works council representatives—as well as of all capitalist parties that in one way or another support the insane policy of rearmament and war for which workers are being made to pay with their jobs and wages.

The Ford Action Committee, which was formed on the initiative of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) against the bidding war between Saarlouis and Almussafes, has opposed the conspiracy of the works council, the trade unions and management from the outset. It insists that a new political orientation is needed to resist the blackmail of management and the works council; a perspective based on the common interests of all workers, and which opposes the logic of the capitalist profit system that the union officials defend tooth and nail.

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