

Ford Germany: IG Metall union calls off second, indefinite strike against Cologne plant closure

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We call on all Ford workers to contact the Ford Action Committee to prepare a fight to defend the Cologne main plant. A second Saarlouis must not be allowed to happen. Send us a WhatsApp message to the following number: +491633378340 or register using the form at the end of this article.

When the IG Metall held a 24-hour strike last Wednesday of 11,500 Ford workers in Cologne, Germany against the plant's threatened closure, the WSWs warned that the union and its works council officials "have no interest in an industrial fight to defend jobs, but are seeking the orderly liquidation of the plant."

The union apparatus itself has confirmed the correctness of this assessment. On Monday, IG Metall called off a second, indefinite strike, which the workforce had voted for by 93.5 percent.

In their press release on Monday, union secretary Kerstin Klein and IG Metall shop stewards David Lüdtker and Frank Koch did not provide any detailed reasons for overriding the membership vote. They merely referred to unspecified "key points" they claimed to have agreed with Ford's German management.

They claim the 24-hour strike, which probably did not cost the company a penny given the plant's low capacity utilisation, led to "management coming far enough towards us in the talks since Thursday that we want to give further negotiations adequate space," said IG Metall negotiator Klein.

After Ford had sent Klein an offer shortly before the first strike began, the union official was apparently on the verge of cancelling even the 24-hour strike, but ultimately decided against it. "We will still go ahead

with the one-day strike as planned, because we will not give up the leverage of industrial action as long as there is no overall package on the table," they wrote at the time. Immediately after the strike, they resumed negotiations and are now reportedly closer to this "comprehensive package."

Benjamin Gruschka, chairman of the Ford Works Council, said, "We were able to agree on a few key points for further negotiations with the German management." This now required approval from the group headquarters in the USA on one or two points. "Until we receive feedback, we will work out further details in working groups."

Frank Koch, head of the Ford Customer Service Division employee representative committee, is quoted in the IG Metall press release as saying: "If the US management is prepared to follow the path we have chosen, we will continue the negotiations; if not, we will have to increase the pressure on the employer side. ... We will then continue and expand the strikes."

Fellow union official David Lüdtker, employee representative at Ford Niehl/Merkenich, claimed: "We are ready to do so at any time." This is all a lie. All previous experience tells a different story.

Last week, IG Metall organised a strike for the first time in the plant's 100-year history, despite several strike ballots by the workforce. Immediately after the workforce had voted to take all-out industrial action, IG Metall blocked it by reaching an agreement with the company's top management.

The only major strike by Ford workers in Germany took place over 50 years ago in 1973. It was not organised by IG Metall, but Ford workers themselves, who were mostly immigrants. At that time, IG Metall

works council members joined in beating up the striking workers, actively helping to brutally crush and end the strike.

The recent ballot for an indefinite strike and last Wednesday's action showed that the workforce is prepared to fight to defend their jobs and Ford's main German plant. But being limited to one 24-hour strike has shown that jobs can only be defended against both management and the union apparatus and their works council reps in the factory. IG Metall only reluctantly organised the strike under pressure from the workforce and has now cancelled it at the first opportunity.

This is not only true for Ford but is a general phenomenon. In their press release, the three union representatives Klein, Lüdtke and Koch sent "solidarity greetings" to the 3,000 steelworkers at Hüttenwerke Krupp Mannesmann (HKM) in Duisburg. They also face an uncertain future because Thyssenkrupp, the majority shareholder, plans to close the plant. The steelworkers are also "in a tough battle for a social collective agreement [*Sozialtarifvertrag*, a type of labor agreement in Germany governing the terms of layoffs]," The three state, concluding: "Stay determined, stay strong, we will stand by you!"

IG Metall, the works council and the shop stewards in Duisburg are just as determined to sabotage every struggle as their counterparts in Cologne. In Duisburg last week, IG Metall called a short one-hour warning strike at HKM, by having the early shift report to work an hour late. A two-hour rally planned for last Monday at Gate 3 was then cancelled, just like the indefinite strike at Ford Cologne.

The reason here, too, is new "negotiations." According to IG Metall, exploratory talks with HKM shareholders Thyssenkrupp Steel and Salzgitter resumed last Friday. "Possible solutions were exchanged constructively and must now be further discussed in various rounds of consultations among the shareholders," the IG Metall wrote in a statement. It also claims that the warning strikes were "only being suspended."

"Your solidarity and high participation in our joint warning strikes over the past two days have helped us get back to the negotiating table," IG Metall told the workers. Here, too, the cancellation of the rally ends with empty bluster to the company's management: "However, if the talks do not develop as desired or if

we find that they are going nowhere, we will consult accordingly."

As long as IG Metall is able to isolate these struggles, it will lead each workforce individually to the slaughter and the plants in Duisburg, Cologne and many other cities will be closed. That is the whole point of a so-called "social collective agreement," for which the IG Metall wants to engage in "tough negotiations." Such contracts mean plants will be gradually closed through partial retirement schemes, severance payments and interim employment companies.

To defend plants and jobs, the workforces must unite. Workers at HKM cannot defend their plant without workers at Thyssenkrupp and other steel companies such as Salzgitter, as well as those at Ford in Cologne. But to organise an industrial fight, rank-and-file action committees independent of the IG Metall apparatus must be formed.

These must unite workers not only across industries in Germany, but worldwide. Nowhere is this clearer than in the auto industry. Ford is a corporation headquartered in the United States with nearly 50 production facilities in more than a dozen countries on four continents.

If the corporate headquarters in Detroit decides to withdraw from Germany and Spain, this can only be prevented if the workforces in Germany—in Cologne and Saarlouis—in Spain and, above all, in the US join forces.

Such a new political orientation is important to resist the blackmail by management and the works council. This is a perspective that is based on the common interests of all workers and opposes the logic of the capitalist profit system, which the union officials defend tooth and nail.



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