

12,000 workers protest as German auto supplier ZF plans massive job cuts

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July 29 saw renewed protests against the cuts to wages, jobs and conditions being imposed by the world's sixth-largest auto supplier, ZF Friedrichshafen AG. Nationwide, over 12,000 workers demonstrated against the board's plans to eliminate thousands more jobs and further reduce wages and salaries.

Early Tuesday morning, around 6,000 employees from the two ZF plants and the research center on the city adjoining Lake Constance marched to the company headquarters. Their protest was directed at the ZF supervisory board meeting, which continues until Thursday and is expected to decide upon additional cuts to those already announced.

Protests also took place in Saarbrücken and Schweinfurt. In front of the Bavarian plant (workforce of 8,600) in Schweinfurt, 4,500 employees demonstrated to keep their jobs while nearly 2,000 employees protested in Saarbrücken (ZF workforce of around 8,500). Current plans call for job cuts of 4,500 from a total 10,000 posts by the end of 2028.

After several years of losses and high debts due to multibillion-dollar acquisitions, particularly in the US, the board of directors announced last summer it would eliminate up to 14,000 jobs in Germany by the end of 2028. This corresponds to approximately one in four ZF jobs in Germany.

Last November, the business newspaper *Wirtschaftswoche* reported from internal documents on the restructuring plan (without giving a specific number) that 15 plants with 300 or fewer employees were threatened with closure, but that larger sites like Friedrichshafen must also expect massive job cuts. Since the beginning of 2024, 5,700 jobs have already been wiped out. Further cuts are now to follow.

Plans range as far as the spin-off and possible sale of the entire motor division ("Division E"), which would entail radical changes for up to 30,000 employees. Older plants with a high degree of specialization and comparatively low profit margins are the focus of the company's restructuring. The ZF executive has set a key target for each factory to achieve a profit margin of at least 19 percent. Failure to meet this target could result in closure or sale.

Last year, the company's loss exceeded €1 billion, after reporting a profit of €126 million in 2023. Overall, ZF, the second-largest auto supplier in Germany after Bosch, has currently more than €10 billion of debt, according to its own statements. The company reports sluggish business in the field of electro-mobility, declining orders, and massive investment commitments. The tariffs agreed upon by the EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen (Christian Democratic Union) with US President Donald Trump over the weekend are also likely to lead to further austerity measures at the auto supplier.

On Thursday, ZF will present its half-year figures for 2025. ZF Friedrichshafen AG is just over 93 percent owned by the Zeppelin Foundation, which is administered by the City of Friedrichshafen and is not listed on the stock exchange. The majority of the dividend therefore goes to the city of Friedrichshafen.

About two weeks ago, ZF management announced at company meetings that the wage cuts and job losses previously agreed upon with the IG Metall union and works council were insufficient. According to IG Metall, it has already imposed annual cuts of €30 million on the workforce, including reduced working hours without compensation.

If IG Metall and its works councils are now leading the protests, it is only to prepare the workforce for further cuts, which they will then sell to the workforce and implement together with the company management.

Helene Sommer, first representative of IG Metall Bodensee-Oberschwaben, accused the ZF management of a lack of a plan at a rally in front of the company headquarters in Friedrichshafen. "We are here because we need a change of course," exclaimed the daughter of long-time German Trade Union Federation (DGB) chairman Michael Sommer.

"We have improved operationally, but the results are worse; this is an archetypal bottomless pit," she told the workforce. There is no future for the workforce if the heart of the company, the motor division, is sold or spun off. "We will not allow ZF's heart to be ripped out," Sommer

continued.

Her husband, General Works Council Chairman Achim Dietrich, accused ZF CEO Holger Klein of running the company from a “McKinsey perspective” without involving employees. “We need to find someone to lead us again, and Klein isn’t doing that,” Dietrich said. “Employees shouldn’t bear the consequences of the crisis alone.”

In Saarbrücken, Patrick Selzer, the local representative of IG Metall, claimed that they would “in no way support the board’s games.” Restructuring the company without the workforce would be impossible. “We need a future perspective,” he demanded.

What the IG Metall works councils and union officials understand by “employee involvement” and “future perspective” has been repeatedly demonstrated in recent years at ZF and many other companies, including VW, Ford, Opel, Mercedes, Bosch, Continental, and most recently at Thyssenkrupp Steel, along with very many smaller companies.

The representatives of the union apparatus want a say in the development of the mechanisms and regulations for the cuts. Their privileges are to be protected, and the workforce is to be forced to forgo wages and jobs with terms such as “no compulsory layoffs,” “socially acceptable downsizing” and “socially acceptable” contracts.

It is these mechanisms and terms that the ZF Supervisory Board is currently discussing at its two-day meeting. The following IG Metall officials and works council members sit on the Supervisory Board, together with Helene Sommer and her husband Achim Dietrich:

- Barbara Resch, district director of IG Metall Baden-Württemberg (deputy chair)
- Peter Kippes, functional head of industrial policy at IG Metall
- Mario Kläs, chairman of the Saarbrücken Works Council of ZF Friedrichshafen AG
 - Oliver Moll, chairman of the Schweinfurt Works Council of ZF Friedrichshafen AG
 - Jürgen Sammer, chairman of the General Works Council of ZF Friedrichshafen AG
 - Jens Schäfer, chairman of the Hanover Works Council of ZF CV Systems Hannover GmbH
 - Hermann Sicklinger, chairman of the Passau Works Council of ZF Friedrichshafen AG
 - Erdal Tahta, chairman of the Koblenz Works Council of ZF Active Safety GmbH

These officials, whose jobs and livelihoods are not at risk, will support the “restructuring” that the ZF executive considers necessary, with all the associated attacks on wages and jobs, as long as they are part of the process.

The current crisis in the auto industry is part of a global

attack on the working class. Jobs are being destroyed all over the world, social gains and democratic rights are being eroded, and the working class is being attacked head on. The money saved is being used to finance genocide, war and insane levels of rearmament.

This is also the case in Germany. While the German government is pouring hundreds of billions of euros into rearmament and war, the jobs massacre is escalating in the auto, supplier, chemical, steel and other key industries. The unions are ensuring that the job cuts go smoothly and that any resistance is nipped in the bud by isolating the affected workforces.

The German arms industry, on the other hand, is making fantastic profits. Arms manufacturers are reporting bulging order books. The new government agreed special fund for war of over a trillion euros is expected to cause the profits of Rheinmetall and other arms companies to explode even more than they have done already.

At the same time, jobs, which the existence of hundreds of thousands of families and entire regions depend upon, are being destroyed, and all of society’s resources are being channeled into war and destruction. This is a symptom of a deeply sick social system. Defending jobs under these conditions is inextricably linked to the fight against war and capitalism.

This requires a break with the trade union apparatuses, which have become the henchmen of the corporations and unconditionally support the government’s war and rearmament policies.

We therefore call on all ZF employees and all workers to establish independent action committees, controlled by the employees themselves, to defend jobs and connect with colleagues around the world. Please contact us via WhatsApp at +491633378340 and register using the form below.



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