Germany: Printing press manufacturer Heidelberg joins in war fever

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3 August 2025

The share price of print equipment manufacturer Heidelberger Druckmaschinen AG (HDM) surged by 35 percent on July 29, after the company announced it was entering arms production.

Company CEO Jürgen Otto announced a long-term strategic partnership with Vincorion, already active in security technology. Vincorion originated from the military technology division of the East German tech conglomerate Jenoptik; among other things, it manufactures generators for the Eurofighter combat jet.

"The arms market is a huge market, worth many, many billions of euros, and growing," Otto exulted. This was the "first concrete project from the arms industry" HDM was now entering. Over the next three years, the company expected to generate at least €100 million in the arms sector, he added.

"This gives Heidelberg access to a segment with growth potential and high margins, connected to Europe's drive for greater defence autonomy," wrote Comdirect, a subsidiary of Commerzbank. "Strategically, Heidelberger Druck is thus aligning more strongly with security-critical technologies, making its business more robust and valuable in the long term."

HDM is not alone. The feverish turn by many engineering firms toward the production of military goods aligns with the political goals of the imperialist powers vying for dominance on the world market. Driven by collapsing profits in the civilian sector—thanks in part to the trade war between Europe and the US—many major corporations are joining the business of death:

• **ZF Friedrichshafen** is actively offering its facilities for arms production and converting capacities, such as for military propulsion systems.

• **Trumpf** is developing and producing laser weapons for the first time, targeting drone defence—an entry into high-end military technology.

• **Continental** is partnering with Germany's largest arms manufacturer Rheinmetall and converting plants formerly used for automotive technology into facilities for weapons components.

• **Volkswagen (VW)** is considering converting its Osnabrück plant for tank production; its entry into the defence sector has been officially confirmed by the company's leadership.

• **Bosch** is losing skilled workers to the arms sector and using facilities for military subcontracting.

Meanwhile, existing arms manufacturers are also expanding their production capabilities:

• **Rheinmetall** is converting former auto parts production lines (especially in Berlin and Neuss) into weapons and ammunition factories to meet soaring demand.

• **KNDS (Krauss-Maffei Wegmann)** is repurposing former railway tech factories—such as those acquired from Alstom—for the production of tank components.

• **Hensoldt** is actively recruiting engineers from the civilian mechanical engineering sector to ramp up production of military electronics and radar systems.

In addition, large German machine tool makers such as Walter Maschinenbau, Vollmer, Heller, and Fein are increasingly acting as suppliers of industrial equipment and components that end up—sometimes indirectly—in international arms manufacturing. The focus here is on CNC machines used for the precision production of weapons, vehicles and ammunition. These are sold not only within Germany but also exported to third countries.

Heidelberger Druckmaschinen AG was once a global leader in the production of printing presses for commercial and magazine printing. But with the rise of

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digital communication and the online availability of newspapers and magazines, demand for printed products has fallen.

According to another printing press manufacturer, König & Bauer, global demand for newspaper presses declined by about 70 percent between 2008 and 2018. The growth of online retail led to some expansion in the packaging and digital printing segment, but the profit margins of the past were gone.

This trend led HDM to diversify its product portfolio. In recent years, it introduced new product lines, including consumables and charging infrastructure for electric vehicles, automation technologies and robotics. Nevertheless, annual revenues fell steadily—from about €3.6 billion in 2007 to €2.25 billion in the 2024/25 financial year. Production capacities were therefore underutilised.

So, when CEO Otto announced the strategic partnership with Vincorion, he highlighted the company's excellent "scalability"—its ability to increase output without massively raising investment costs. Heidelberg aims to reposition itself as a reliable partner in security-related sectors, he declared.

The IG Metall union supports Germany's military buildup and thus also HDM's corporate goals. At the end of last year, the union betrayed the roughly 3,500 HDM workers during the wage dispute for higher pay.

At a strike on November 6, Heiko Massfeller, head of IG Metall Heidelberg, acknowledged the burden that rising prices placed on working families: "Workers are paying significantly more for groceries—something we notice directly in our wallets. We therefore need more money now, also to help stimulate the economy."

Yet just four weeks later, on December 9, IG Metall announced it had agreed to substantial cuts in real wages and the elimination of nearly one in eight jobs: "To improve cost efficiency, the wage increase from this current round of negotiations will be offset against performance-based bonuses. This will keep wages constant, and workers won't lose money."

Considering the previously emphasised rise in food prices, this stagnation in pay amounted to a cut in real wages and was something IG Metall no longer wanted to hear about. The job cuts were once again dressed up as being organised in a "socially acceptable" manner: "Up to 450 posts will be eliminated across all departments and levels over the coming years, for example through the retirement of older employees."

Once again, the union tried to present a defeat as a major victory. It fully backs the militarisation of production and the war economy, for which it is prepared to sacrifice hundreds of thousands of jobs. But who is it trying to fool?

Workers everywhere are having the same experiences: layoffs and "downsizing" via early retirement or hiring freezes, skyrocketing prices for food, rent and energy, falling wages and living standards, slashing of social benefits, and cutbacks to healthcare and education. Billions in cutbacks are being redirected into militarisation and war.

Workers' readiness to resist this conversion to a war economy is growing worldwide. What is needed is to organise and unite these forces in rank-and-file action committees, independently of the pro-corporate union leadership. We therefore call on all workers in mechanical engineering—and beyond—to join the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees in the fight against mass layoffs. Contact us by sending a WhatsApp message to +49 163 3378340 and register using the form below.

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