

# Elon Musk's exploitative methods at the Tesla Grünheide factory in Germany and the role of the IG Metall union

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When Elon Musk opened the huge Tesla Gigafactory in Grünheide with a ceremony in the spring of 2022, then-Chancellor Olaf Scholz of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and Green Party Economics Minister Robert Habeck showered him with praise. The IG Metall trade union, which is attempting to expand into the plant, announced that it had “every interest in seeing this plant flourish and enjoy lasting success.”

Birgit Dietze, who was then the IGM district manager responsible for Tesla, sent the following message to Tesla: “I congratulate Tesla and its founder Elon Musk on the opening of the factory.” She added: “The employees in Grünheide are pioneers of electric mobility.”

The Grünheide production complex was built in a record time of two years. Approval procedures were shortened or effectively eliminated. SPD-led ministries and authorities made themselves accomplices. Jörg Steinbach, then SPD Minister of Economic Affairs in the state of Brandenburg, organised regular meetings with the Tesla project managers. There, according to Steinbach himself, “they gave me new tasks on Mondays that I had to complete by Friday.”

Steinbach's devotion to Tesla continues unabated to this day. At the end of June, he revealed to the workforce at a staff meeting in Grünheide that he considered himself one of the “friends of the Tesla family.” He accused the workers of “ingratitude.” As if he were Musk's personal aide, he urged the workers to “thank your superiors, the plant manager” or “the management.”

What many had long suspected recently became public knowledge: The grateful former SPD minister joined the law firm CMS Hasche Sigle a few weeks ago. CMS advised the state of Brandenburg, represented at the time by Steinbach, on the sale of the 300-hectare site in Grünheide to Tesla, among other things. At the same time, CMS represents Tesla itself.

It is therefore not surprising that the plant was able to be built in a designated water protection area—despite massive protests from residents and environmental groups. Underpaid migrant workers from Eastern Europe, Asia, and Latin America toiled on the construction site for 10 to 12 hours a day, often without adequate safety precautions. These conditions did not only apply to the “construction phase,” they set the tone for later production.

At the opening, Musk boasted about the production of 500,000 vehicles per year, up to 40,000 jobs, and an expansion to include a

battery factory and supplier plants.

Three-and-a-half years later, little remains of this. In the summer of 2025, rarely more than 5,000 cars per week left the factory, and even those are being put on hold because sales markets have collapsed by 58 percent in the first six months of 2025.

Currently, only around 11,000 people are employed in Grünheide, down from just under 12,500 at times. Several hundred temporary workers have been laid off and entire shifts have been reduced in size.

The international workforce—the plant employs people from 150 nations—is being literally burned out in Tesla's bone-crushing mill. For the most dangerous and strenuous tasks—assembly lines at “breakneck speed,” work on melting furnaces, hazardous painting facilities—Tesla wears out physically resilient but often low-skilled workers in no time, only to replace them with new, poorer recruits. They are promised training or German language courses, but what they get is immediate deployment under maximum stress.

Toxic fumes and fine aluminium dust in the air, faulty machines—the list of hazards is long. In the first twelve months after production started, emergency services had to respond 247 times. The most common injuries were falls, cuts, nosebleeds, chemical poisoning and burns.

A former shift supervisor told *Stern* magazine: “People are being burned out at Tesla. At times, every second person in my team was sick.” In August 2024, sick leave temporarily reached 17 percent. Human resources manager Erik Demmler and plant manager André Thierig threatened sick workers with unannounced home visits, threatened to cancel wage payments, and demanded that workers disclose their diagnoses and release their doctors from their confidentiality obligations.

Workers reported receiving letters with the subject line “Doubts about the submitted certificates of incapacity for work,” which announced the immediate cutoff of payments. In some cases, Tesla demanded money back, alleged “overpayments” that were declared “debts.” Those who could not pay were pressured to sign a termination agreement to avoid the alleged debt.

Elon Musk, the richest man in the world, cold-bloodedly subordinates the health and lives of his workforce to his profit interests and stops at nothing to achieve his goals. As a result, staff turnover is extremely high: in Musk's factories worldwide, 40 to 70 percent of workers are often replaced each year.

Confidentiality clauses in employment contracts and intimidation tactics were unable to prevent news of the poor working conditions from reaching the outside world. *Stern* and *Handelsblatt* have published several reports on experiences at the Grünheide plant.

In 2022, whistleblower Lukasz Krupski caused a global sensation. The Polish-born engineer, who started working as a service technician in Norway in 2018, discovered by chance that he had unrestricted access to highly sensitive Tesla data: financial, personnel, and health data of 100,000 employees worldwide.

After authorities in Norway and the US showed no interest, Krupski turned to the *Handelsblatt* newspaper, which evaluated 100 GB of data and published it in May 2023 under the title “The Tesla Files”—covering data protection disasters, security issues, and corporate culture. Tesla responded with lawsuits and a house search, and Krupski’s devices were confiscated. The legal battle, which lasted several years, ended this year with Krupski’s acquittal.

On 1 August, *Handelsblatt* once again published a rather extensive “insider report” on “the conditions in the Grünheide plant.” Significantly, the financial newspaper supports IG Metall’s efforts to gain a foothold at Tesla. The *Handelsblatt*, naturally committed to the interests of German car companies, favours the German model of labour-management “co-determination” and social partnership, in which the unions, as paid lackeys of the corporations, ensure peace and order in the factories.

If it had its way, IG Metall would also play its role as factory police at Tesla. In all other German car factories, the metalworkers’ union and its works councils have taken on the task of enforcing the profit interests of the corporations against the workforce. They ensure that wage cuts and massive job cuts take place as smoothly as possible. If they are occasionally forced to take protest action or go on strike, they use these measures only to absorb the workers’ anger and sabotage any serious industrial action.

The efforts of IG Metall at Tesla must be viewed in this context. For some time now, it has been trying to lure members into the company by promising them the associated labor law protection. IG Metall knows, of course, that Tesla workers in particular urgently need this. According to its figures, Tesla employees have used legal protection around 21 times more often than usual.

Officially, IG Metall condemns some of Tesla’s practices. The Berlin IGM district manager Dirk Schulze spoke of “intimidation.” But their goal is clear: to get a foot in the door, secure works council positions, and sell Musk a “more stable social climate.” The methods of Tesla’s management are “not only highly dubious and inhumane,” explained IGM official Schulze, but above all “also counterproductive.” What is he trying to tell Elon Musk and Tesla?

Musk, whose oligarchic activities span the US and internationally, is a neo-Nazi who has publicly supported the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) in Germany, right-wing hardliners in the US, and, until recently, US President Donald Trump. As head of Trump’s “Department of Government Efficiency” (DOGE), he pushed through mass layoffs in the public sector. Musk is hated worldwide, which is one of the reasons why sales of Tesla models are declining.

But IG Metall is offering to work with him. Their service: if Tesla finally brings IG Metall on board, they and their works councils will ensure that production runs smoothly and that the workforce stops rebelling. Sick leave would be kept low even without illegal pressure tactics—as IG Metall has demonstrated at VW, Daimler, BMW, etc.

But as dire as the situation at Tesla is, it would be naive to believe that such methods and working conditions are not already spreading in German corporations generally. For over a year, various representatives of the German economy and politicians have been complaining about excessive sick leave and calling for restrictions on wage payments during sickness.

Demands for longer working hours, retirement only from the age of 70, and the abolition of welfare benefits are becoming louder and louder and are already on the German government’s agenda. In order to finance the gigantic war budget and keep the German economy profitable in the trade war, the working class is to be squeezed even harder.

The unions expressly support this.

An international response from the working class is needed to counter this national phalanx of government, corporations, and unions. Struggles must not remain confined to the national level. In the global auto industry, supply chains and production are intertwined across countries—there is no such thing as a “German” or “American” car. Only through independent self-organisation in action committees, combined with a socialist perspective, can Musk’s exploitation be effectively combated.

We call on Tesla workers in Grünheide: Get involved in building an independent rank-and-file committee to unite with your colleagues worldwide. Get in touch with us. Send a WhatsApp message to +49 163 3378340 and register using the form below.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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