

IG Metall pushes through cuts at Thyssenkrupp Steel with a “social collective agreement”

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Germany’s biggest trade union, IG Metall, has signed off the loss of 11,000 jobs and wage cuts of around 8 percent at Thyssenkrupp Steel in a new “social collective agreement.” The union’s action reaffirms that defending jobs and wages can only be carried out, not with, but only against the IGM apparatus and its network of works councils.

The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) calls on all Thyssenkrupp employees to organise themselves independently of the bureaucrats in action committees at every plant, to network and take up the fight against the impending complete dismantling of the company steel division. Contact us via Whatsapp at +491633378340 and register using the form at the end of the article.

Voting ended last Friday on the deal that union leaders had agreed upon behind closed doors with the company’s top management back in July. IG Metall claims that 77 percent voted in favour of the cuts. In reality, only about a third of the workforce voted in favour.

If you do the math, the supposedly high level of support is put into perspective. According to IG Metall, just 62 percent of its members in the steel giant’s factories took part in the vote, with 77 percent voting in favour of acceptance. Assuming, generously, that 75 per cent of all steel workers are still members of IG Metall, this means only about one in three voted in favour of the cuts under pressure from the union.

A review of the provisions of the collective agreement makes clear why many have already turned their backs on IG Metall, why more than a third of the remaining IGM members did not vote, and why one in four of those who did participate voted against the contract.

In the so-called “social collective agreement,” IG Metall largely incorporated the company’s list of demands, which were made public in July and described at the time as a “poison list.” In some cases, the union even went further than the company’s demands, for example, agreeing to a

reduction in working hours from 34 to 32.5 hours—the company had demanded 33 hours.

In view of the sharp rise in inflation, this threatens to impoverish many employees. Overall, each worker will lose several thousand euros a year, up to a total of €5,500. Holiday and Christmas bonuses have been cut by a total of around €1,500, and the contractual “special payment for job security” will also be withheld. Anniversary payments have been almost completely eliminated.

In addition a total of 11,000 jobs are to be cut. Most recently, 26,000 workers were still employed in the steel division. The union agreed with the company to close the two Bochum sites on Castroper Strasse and Essener Strasse, the latter already at the end of this year. In Duisburg, blast furnaces 8 and 9 are to be decommissioned. Blast furnace 9 had only been restarted in 2018 after extensive modernisation and was subsequently at the centre of the company’s experiments with “green hydrogen.”

The works council and IG Metall officials consider it a success that the attacks on jobs and wages could be implemented despite the low level of support.

The head of the trade union in North Rhine-Westphalia, Knut Giesler, who spearheaded the deal with the company, said he was aware that the vote would mean “painful cuts” for all workers. But these were necessary, he said, “to make the steel division fit for the future”.

Tekin Nasikkol, head of the general works council, also praised the cuts: “We have reached our pain threshold and are making our maximum contribution to what we hope will be a positive future for steel.”

The two union leaders can afford to talk. Both earn six-figure annual salaries for their work and neither of them will have to give up a single cent of their generous remuneration.

That is why they have no problem with “the ball now being in the board’s court,” as Nasikkol added. Giesler remarked that “Thyssenkrupp AG is now called upon to do its part.” A financing commitment for the planned measures

and investments is needed.

Before and during the vote, they peddled the idea that accepting the “social collective agreement” would secure the future of the workforce. This was nothing other than pure deception. These latest comments make clear that nothing is certain.

A recent flyer from IG Metall shows that the implementation of the agreement is subject to one condition. The company must secure the financing for the deal, which is obviously not yet the case. This is because the planned conversion of the Duisburg steelworks to “green steel” produced on the basis of hydrogen, has become more than questionable in recent months.

Although 750 million of the 2 billion euros in taxpayer money has already been paid to the company for the conversion, the switch is still up in the air. Recently, Supervisory Board Chairman Siegfried Russwurm cast doubt on whether the conversion to hydrogen operation will actually be financed. When asked by the *Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* whether the “green steel plant” would definitely be completed, Russwurm replied: “What do you mean by ‘definitely?’” He said there was a “limit to what the company can handle.”

This does not seem to bother Nasikkol and Giesler. They are confident that the company needs the services of the trade union apparatus for the dirty work that remains to be done in the plants.

The aforementioned IG Metall flyer states: “The task now is to work out the details, particularly with regard to staff reductions and job transfers.” These are “extremely complex” and are now being negotiated by the “general works council and employer” with the executive board. The end result will be a “reconciliation of interests and a social plan.” Once these have been achieved, it will also be clear “which jobs will be cut.”

This means that the insecurity of each individual worker remains. IG Metall and the works councils will stop at nothing when it comes to defending profits by forcing workers onto the street.

Already in the course of the “voluntary programme” in late summer 2020, the works councils put older steelworkers under enormous pressure to force them out of the plants. Some even reported “home visits” during which the works councils urged workers to sign termination agreements. “If you’re not interested, they put pressure on you,” one worker wrote angrily to the WSWS at the time.

Thyssenkrupp workers face an important decision. If they do not stand up to the IGM bureaucracy and the works council, not a single job is safe. On the contrary, the current cuts will facilitate the next ones. If Thyssenkrupp believes that the transition to “green steel” cannot be achieved

profitably, Russwurm and Thyssenkrupp CEO Miguel Lopez will sell off or break up the steel division. Only a skeleton workforce will remain to produce steel for war materials and weapons.

The IG Metall apparatus and the general works council it leads will enforce all this as they have done before. The result of the vote on the social tariff agreement partly reflects this.

Of the approximately 10,000 IGM members who approved the agreement, most were aware that the union, to which they transfer part of their wages every month, will not fight for them anyway. Older colleagues in particular are likely to be tempted to retire early with a reasonable level of security after having devoted decades of their lives and health to the steel industry.

But the workforce—especially younger workers—must resist the downward spiral. Action committees must be set up at all plants, in which workers who want to fight, regardless of their union membership, can organise. This includes all those who are not prepared to accept that their livelihoods be subordinated to shareholder profits and the German government’s preparations for war.

The action committees must network with each other and establish contact with steelworkers at other companies—HKM, Salzgitter, Arcelor, Saarstahl, Voestalpine, Tata Steel, Vallourec, etc.—as well as with workers in other industries such as auto and suppliers. Workers in Germany, Europe and the world face the same problems and the same tasks.

If workers do not stand up to the IGM apparatus and its henchmen in the works councils now, there is only one way they will go—downhill.

We therefore appeal to all Thyssenkrupp employees: become active, contact us via Whatsapp at +491633378340 and register by using the form at the end of this article.



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