

Once again: Why German union IG Metall cannot be reformed and rank-and-file committees must be established

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On December 11, the WSWS reported on the growing opposition to the IG Metall union at the Mercedes plant in Berlin-Marienfelde, and called for the establishment of a rank-and-file committee to wage the struggle against layoffs and social cuts independently of the IG Metall apparatus.

“Workers must take the fight for their rights and demands into their own hands,” we wrote. “This requires new fighting organizations, organizations that prioritize workers’ rights over profit interests and break through IG Metall’s nationalist policies by networking across locations, companies, industries and national borders.”

Shortly after the article appeared, we received an angry comment from a reader calling himself “Frenchie.” He defends IG Metall and accuses us of dividing the workers. He compares our proposal to build independent rank-and-file committees with the Italian ideologically oriented trade unions and with the policy pursued by the Stalinist Communist Party of Germany (KPD) in the early 1930s. At that time, the KPD drove a wedge between Social Democratic and Communist workers by establishing independent unions under the name “Revolutionary Trade Union Opposition” (Revolutionäre Gewerkschaftsopposition, RGO).

“Frenchie” speaks for those pseudo-left trade unionists who like to call themselves “militant,” but in reality fight for only one thing: the defense of the discredited IG Metall union. While workers are leaving the union in droves, these “militants” are doing everything they can to stuff them back into the straitjacket of the bureaucratic apparatus.

Given the importance of this question, we take this opportunity to once again explain our position.

“Frenchie” writes:

You have to work first of all with what you have. Perhaps the day will come when new, serious unions emerge, but we are not there yet. And even if we were, it would still be important to work together. Or do you want a situation like in Italy, where the various ideologically oriented trade unions are fighting each other?! There is already a rank-and-file committee in Marienfelde, and it would be advisable to work with it to improve the situation of the workers, even if you have different political views (keyword: independent). Your approach smacks strongly of the RGO (not independent), which, as we know, failed miserably.

Every single sentence in this comment is false. It starts with the assertion: “You have to work with what you have.” The workers have nothing with which to “work”—i.e., defend their jobs, wages and working conditions. This applies not only to the Mercedes plant in Marienfelde, but to all companies where around ten thousand jobs are being destroyed every month in Germany.

IG Metall is not opposing this industrial bloodletting, but is using its bloated apparatus of officials, works councils and shop stewards to ensure that it proceeds smoothly and that any resistance to it comes to nothing.

IG Metall and other contemporary unions have nothing in common with the reformist mass organizations of the 19th and 20th centuries, which fought for better wages, working conditions and workers’ rights in oftentimes bitter class battles. Decades of “social partnership” (Sozialpartnerschaft) and legally regulated “co-determination” (Mitbestimmung) have completely fused the modern unions with the state and big business, and the unions now function as the latter’s extended arm.

Their officials (such as German Trade Union Confederation [DGB] chairwoman Yasmin Fahimi) move smoothly from political party positions to government roles and from there into union offices. They become ministers or—like the former IG Metall district leader of North Rhine-Westphalia, Oliver Burkhard—head of large weapons manufacturers.

Union members, on the other hand, have no say and no rights. There is no democracy in the unions. In IG Metall, the powerful regional leaders are appointed and paid by the national executive committee and are bound by its instructions. These regional representatives, in turn, determine who climbs the career ladder and gets a promising position in works council elections or a well-paid supervisory board post. Those who don’t toe the line are kicked out.

Frenchie’s accusation that the establishment of a rank-and-file committee is dividing the workforce turns reality on its head. In fact, it is IG Metall that is systematically dividing the workforce and playing them off against each other—union members against non-members, full-time employees against temporary workers, location against location and country against country.

At Ford, the IG Metall and its works councils organized the miserable bidding war that pitted the workers in Saarlouis, Germany against their colleagues in Almussafes, Spain. Now both locations are being gradually shut down. The workforces of Opel Bochum, ThyssenKrupp Stahl and numerous other companies have also been systematically betrayed and sold out by IG Metall.

The establishment of rank-and-file committees overcomes this division of workers—not under the barracks discipline of the union apparatus, but on the basis of common struggle. Rank-and-file committees are based on the principle that the social interests of the working class—the vast majority of the population—take precedence over the profit interests of a small minority of billionaires. The right to adequate incomes and pensions is non-negotiable.

Anyone serious about fighting to defend jobs, wages, social gains and workers' rights is welcome to join the rank-and-file committee. It does not matter whether they have a union card or a German passport, where they were born, what their native language is or whether they are a permanent employee or a temporary worker. Union officials, on the other hand, are not welcome, because free discussion and democratic decisions are only possible without company representatives from the trade union.

Unlike in the unions, it is the members who have the say in rank-and-file committees. Those in charge are elected by the members and are accountable to them. They receive neither special remuneration nor supervisory board fees.

The rank-and-file committees do not fight each other, but network across borders to effectively coordinate the struggles against globally active corporations. To this end, the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, the IWA-RFC was founded.

"Frenchie" obviously rejects all of this. He wants to tie the Mercedes plant workers to IG Metall until "perhaps" the day comes "when new, serious unions emerge." He does not tell us how this miracle is supposed to happen.

"Frenchie's" claim that there is already a rank-and-file committee in Marienfelde is also false. He is apparently referring to the group "Autoarbeiter für eine kämpfende IG Metall" (Auto Workers for a Militant IG Metall), which we discussed in detail in our December 11 article. Under the guise of "militant rhetoric," this group is attempting to lure workers who have turned their backs on IG Metall back into the union. It is collecting signatures for petitions asking IG Metall to be more militant.

The degeneration of the unions, which can be observed in every country in the world, is not only the result of the widespread corruption of their leadership. It is rooted in the very form of the unions themselves. (See David North's lecture: "Why are trade unions hostile to socialism?") Because the unions justify and defend the capitalist profit system on which their activities are based, they subordinate the interests of workers to the interests of profit. This gives rise to their boundless opportunism.

While trade unions were still able to secure social concessions during the post-war economic boom, this is no longer possible under the conditions of globalization and crisis. The global nature of production and financial markets has undermined all national reformist programs. Companies can relocate production at any time, while trade unions remain tied to the national framework.

German unions now see their task as defending the "competitiveness" of "Germany as a business location" against its competitors—with all that this entails: layoffs, low wages and intense work pressure. They divide workers and play them off against each other according to location, company and nation. They stand behind German corporations in the international trade war, demanding tariffs on products from China and tax breaks for local corporations. They support the rearmament of the German army, the war in Ukraine and the genocide in Gaza.

That is why the prospect of renewing the unions leads to a dead end.

In reality, it only serves to pacify workers, lull them into believing in a better future and paralyze their fighting power. Rank-and-file committees are not "new unions." They do not subordinate themselves to profit interests. They are—in workplaces, neighborhoods, and elsewhere—germ cells with which the working class can take control of the economy and society.

"Frenchie's" claim that our call to build rank-and-file committees "smacks of the RGO" is a gross falsification of history. It is a standard argument of all "left" defenders of the union bureaucracy.

The KPD's building of independent "revolutionary" unions in the early 1930s was part of its ultra-left "social fascism" policy, which equated the SPD with the Nazis and strictly rejected a united front against the fascist danger. The resulting split in the working class contributed significantly to Hitler's victory.

However, the mistake made by the KPD was not that it weakened the trade unions, but that it weakened itself, as Leon Trotsky, the most important Marxist opponent of Stalinism, emphasized at the time. Many Social Democratic (SPD) workers were organized in the ADGB [General German Trade Union Federation, 1919-1933], which the KPD surrendered to the influence of the SPD without a fight by founding its own associations. Trotsky did not fetishize the unity of the ADGB, about whose pro-capitalist orientation he had no illusions. But unlike today's corporatist trade union apparatuses, many workers were still active in the ADGB at that time.

Trotsky did not hesitate for a moment to propose new initiatives when the opportunity arose. In France in the mid-1930s, he advocated the establishment of rank-and-file committees to break the paralyzing influence of the "Popular Front" of Stalinists, Social Democrats and bourgeois radicals.

In the founding program of the Fourth International in 1938, Trotsky wrote:

Therefore, the sections of the Fourth International should always strive not only to renew the top leadership of the trade unions, ... but also to create in all possible instances independent militant organizations corresponding more closely to the tasks of mass struggle against bourgeois society; and, if necessary, not flinching even in the face of a direct break with the conservative apparatus of the trade unions.

"Frenchie's" comment, which justifies the union apparatus and its daily machinations in the factories because there is no alternative, is a pathetic declaration of bankruptcy. Mercedes workers in Marienfelde and elsewhere should reject this pessimistic and submissive whining with contempt. Of course it is possible and absolutely necessary to build new structures of struggle in factories.

We invite all autoworkers, in Mercedes and Marienfelde and beyond, to contact us and discuss the necessary next steps. Send us a WhatsApp message at +491633378340 and fill out the form below.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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