

Erfurt, Germany: Mail order fashion company Zalando closes logistics center with 2,700 employees

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The German mail order fashion company Zalando announced January 7 that it plans to close its logistics center in Erfurt, Germany by fall 2026; 2,700 employees will lose their jobs.

The case of Zalando highlights the vital importance of workers taking the defense of jobs into their own hands and setting up rank-and-file committees, joining forces with workers at other workplaces to organize joint industrial action.

Officials from the German services union Verdi claim they were surprised by the company's decision, but immediately announced their willingness to negotiate a "social plan." This means nothing more than consent and cooperation in closing the site. Politicians such as former minister president of the State of Thuringia, Bodo Ramelow (Die Linke, "Left Party"), feign outraged and speak of predatory capitalism, even though it was they who for years fed the predator with lavish subsidies.

Zalando SE is a Europe-wide mail order fashion company based in Berlin and has been in existence for 20 years. The headquarters in Erfurt, Thuringia, Germany, was opened 12 years ago to take advantage of low wages in the east of Germany and high subsidies provided by the state. In the summer of 2012, the first 350 employees began trial operations in a warehouse in Erfurt. This was followed by additional centers in the cities of Mönchengladbach in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia, Lahr in the Black Forest (state of Baden-Württemberg) and Peine (in the state of Lower Saxony), as well as in Poland, Italy and Ireland.

Zalando started out as an online shoe retailer. At a time when the large German department stores Quelle, Karstadt and Hertie were struggling, Zalando was able to expand its range to include fashion, sportswear, jewelry, cosmetics and accessories. Zalando founders David Schneider and Robert Gentz deliberately focused on subsidies from German states, the federal government and the EU, as well as on low wages in eastern Germany and Eastern Europe. The company's

high profits also attracted well-known corporations and banks such as Holtzbrinck, Tengelmann, J.P. Morgan, etc., which bought shares in Zalando.

The innovative start-up image cultivated by the owners collapsed six years ago. It became known that Zalando, just like Amazon, was putting its employees under enormous pressure to keep profits high. In a study for the Hans Böckler Foundation, a team of researchers from Berlin's Humboldt University found that Zalando had a poor working environment and that its employees suffered from stress and psychological strain. In particular, they criticized the company's use of Zonar personnel evaluation software. Zonar systematically collects evaluations from colleagues and supervisors and puts employees under constant pressure to perform. The study described the surveillance and informant system as "Stasi methods" (referring to the secret police of the former East Germany).

Zalando management refuted this criticism, pointing out that the works council had approved the introduction of Zonar. However, a journalist who worked undercover at Zalando for three months with the support of investigative journalist Günter Wallraff, reported that, as a "picker" at the logistics center in Erfurt, she had to cover distances of up to 27 km during an 8-hour shift and struggled with circulatory problems after five weeks. Emergency medical services were frequently called to the warehouse.

During the coronavirus pandemic, lockdowns boosted online retail and Zalando was added to the DAX stock index. However, since the end of 2023, customer numbers have been in significant decline as a result of the escalating economic crisis. The company's management is responding with a dual strategy: expansion and rationalization.

Last year, Zalando acquired the mail order company ABOUT YOU, a spin-off of the traditional German outlet Otto Versand, for over a billion euros. Zalando's management simultaneously initiated a far-reaching restructuring. While the logistics center in Erfurt is to be

closed, a modern new center will soon be opened in the city of Giessen.

Management justifies the closure of the Erfurt center with so-called “redundancies,” parallel operating processes that have led to excess capacity since the takeover of ABOUT YOU. This “optimization of processes” will result in 2,700 employees losing their livelihoods. At the first signs of a downturn and losses, managers are responding with relocations, layoffs, plant closures and even more pressure on workers.

The outrage expressed by politicians who have showered Zalando entrepreneurs with millions in subsidies and granted them special privileges in recent years is pure hypocrisy. In reality, Ramelow & Co. fear that the closure of Zalando in Erfurt will coincide with the wave of mass layoffs and plant closures in the automotive and supplier industry, and that they will no longer be able to control the growing resistance this evokes.

To date companies and politicians have relied on the unions, which sabotage and isolate any serious struggle. All the whistle protests, warning strikes lasting a few hours and mourning marches that Verdi is now proposing only serve to contain and control anger among workers.

Verdi does not even attempt to give the impression that it wants to defend jobs on principle. In a statement issued January 9, Verdi criticizes the planned closure, saying, “For colleagues affected, some of whom have remained loyal to the site for more than a decade despite low wages, the closure is a slap in the face.” But it was the Verdi officials who claimed that low wages would increase competitiveness and secure jobs.

For this reason Zalando employees must take the defense of their jobs into their own hands. They must insist on convening meetings of all departments—goods receiving, order picking, shipping and administration—where committees of trusted colleagues who can act independently of Verdi are elected.

No negotiations behind closed doors! All agreements, social plans, severance offers, etc., must be made public. Full transparency and the widest possible publicity are necessary. The workforce has been strung along long enough. They worked their fingers to the bone throughout the Christmas season without even being informed about the impending closure plans. Employees have a right to have a say in the future of their jobs.

Company planning for life after job losses, transfers and employment companies are ultimately just stepping stones to unemployment. What is needed are reasonably paid, permanent and secure jobs for all employees and wages that allow them to live decent lives with their families. The needs of workers are more important than the profit interests of a

tiny and rarefied upper class.

To enforce this, the independent rank-and-file committees, acting on decisions arrived at democratically, must prepare industrial action, including strikes, blockades and, as a last resort, workplace occupations. To this end, it is important to immediately establish contact with colleagues in all Zalando locations and also to reach out to employees in other companies, industries and countries. Zalando has announced that, in addition to the closure in Erfurt, it will also terminate the contracts of three other external service providers outside Germany. Their employees must be located and contacted immediately and the motto must be: one for all and all for one!

The allies of Zalando staff are not the union bureaucrats in the Berlin and Frankfurt headquarters, nor are they politicians of any stripe, from the Alternative for Germany (AfD) to the Left Party, whether in the Thuringian state parliament in Erfurt or in the Berlin Bundestag (federal parliament). Their allies are their colleagues at other logistics companies and mail order firms in Germany and abroad, at Amazon, Otto Versand, DHL, GLS, UPS, Hermes, etc.

The Zalando closure in Erfurt is part of a comprehensive job massacre. 2025 was the year with the most bankruptcies in recent memory. In hundreds of companies, workers are confronted with wage theft, job cuts and work pressure. They are all potential allies in the fight for jobs.

For international cooperation and against nationalist orientation—it is on this basis that the *World Socialist Web Site*, together with the Socialist Equality Parties belonging to the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), has founded the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

We call on everyone who is not prepared to accept the announced shutdown without a fight to contact us. Take action now, contact us via WhatsApp at +491633378340 and register using the form below.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:
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