

The end of printing press manufacturer Manroland in Offenbach, Germany and the role of the IG Metall union

Marianne Arens
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Manroland Sheetfed GmbH, once the world's third-largest manufacturer of printing presses and Offenbach's biggest employer, will cease operations there on June 1, 2026. The final 744 employees are losing their jobs, 660 on June 1 and the remaining 84 at the end of the year, when the factory is wound down. On March 6, Langley Holdings initiated provisional self-administration proceedings and appointed an insolvency administrator. At a works meeting on April 20, workers were informed of the definitive closure. The works council and IG Metall union are demanding a "transfer company" be established for those dismissed.

It is impossible to speak about the end of Manroland in Offenbach without looking back at the breakup of the corporation 14 years ago. And anyone speaking about the insolvency at the turn of 2011-2012 must also address the role played by IG Metall.

It is thanks to the union that a workforce of more than 6,600 highly trained and militant workers at three sites—Offenbach, Augsburg and Plauen—could be misled, divided, deceived and massively attacked for two months without resistance. The course was set back then for today's disgraceful ending in Offenbach.

When Langley Holdings, a privately owned British engineering and industrial manufacturing group, took over Manroland Offenbach in February 2012, the company had already been broken into pieces with the Augsburg and Plauen sites separated off and sold. More than 2,000 jobs were destroyed, and the remaining workforce stripped of pension rights and entitlements won through decades of struggle.

At the time, the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, the *Offenbach Post* and IG Metall praised the takeover and re-establishment of the firm as Manroland Sheetfed GmbH under the direction of Langley Holdings as "the best solution for Offenbach". The new owner Anthony Langley was hailed as a "white knight" and "Robin Hood." The *World Socialist Web Site*, by contrast, warned on February 7, 2012:

In reality, the new owners are not interested in the production of printing machines, and certainly not in the future of workers and their families. ... Realistically, one must assume that the new owners seized the favourable opportunity to acquire the best "crown jewels" for little money. They are primarily interested in conducting financial transactions worth millions.

This assessment has been fully confirmed. At no point did Anthony Langley, chairman and CEO of Langley Holdings, provide any guarantee for jobs at Manroland. Remarking that "The situation is not sustainable," he has now decided the ultra-modern Manroland production facility, which can look back on more than 155 years of experience in printing

press technology, will close on June 1.

Manroland workers, many of whom have been employed there for 30 years or longer, and who built up the Offenbach factory as skilled professional workers, are now losing everything. Langley's wealth, by contrast, which stood at \$368 million in 2011, is today estimated at around \$3.6 billion—a tenfold increase in his fortune. He owns two large yachts, a seven-seat helicopter and a private jet, as well as a sailing club.

His fortune had "really taken off steeply from 2005 onwards," Langley boasted to *Forbes*. He was referring to the start of his activity as a so-called "locust," buying up troubled companies, carving them up, selling profitable sections at a gain and bleeding the rest dry.

This development was foreseeable: billions for the capitalists, unemployment and hopelessness for the workers who built everything. It is the result of IG Metall's refusal at the time to fight for jobs. That is why a look back at the history of Manroland is of the greatest significance today for all metalworkers and engineers—whether at VW, Thyssen, Bosch or other plants threatened with job cuts and closure. It contains vital lessons.

The most important lesson is this: IG Metall will abandon anyone who relies on it. What is necessary is the building of rank-and-file action committees independent of IG Metall and all the unions, capable of acting on the basis of a socialist and international programme.

How IG Metall helped break up Manroland

From the outset, IG Metall has played a key role in preparing, implementing and suppressing all resistance to the breakup, the massive destruction of jobs and the rapid insolvency.

When Manroland filed for bankruptcy on November 20, 2011, the company was, after Heidelberg Druckmaschinen and König & Bauer, the world's third-largest printing press manufacturer. It employed 6,600 workers, 1,900 in Offenbach alone, in addition to 2,500 in Augsburg, 750 in Plauen and others in Mainhausen and other locations. Only nine weeks later, by mid-February 2012, the company had been broken into its component parts and effectively halved—without any genuine industrial struggle.

"We could have fought—but IG Metall prevented it," was the bitter conclusion of one worker speaking to the WSWS.

As early as November 15, 2011, two weeks before the official announcement, when a Manroland extraordinary supervisory board meeting decided on insolvency, six union functionaries were present, supposedly as "employee representatives." Far from immediately warning

and mobilising the workforce and launching a fight, they agreed that day to a standstill agreement, which they rigidly maintained towards the Manroland workforce at all sites.

Jürgen Kerner, then a member of the IG Metall executive board and deputy chairman of the Manroland supervisory board, today deputy chairman of IG Metall, reached agreement with chief executive Gerd Finkbeiner and insolvency administrator Werner Schneider to begin sales negotiations with the head of the Lübeck-based company Possehl & Co. All four knew each other well, having already arranged the sale of the insolvent Augsburg envelope manufacturer Böwe Systec to Possehl the previous year.

Ten days later, on November 25, 2011, Manroland AG filed for insolvency at Augsburg District Court—not in Offenbach, where its headquarters were located. The choice of the court in Augsburg was a deliberate step in a manoeuvre intended to facilitate Possehl's takeover of the Augsburg site.

How deeply IG Metall was involved in this manoeuvre was shown by the fact that, long before the creditors' committee officially voted for Possehl, the union had already agreed to a corresponding restructuring contract. The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* pointed out at the time that "intensive talks had already taken place between Possehl and IG Metall before the creditors' advisory board ... had even reached its decision on splitting up the company," which even the business newspaper remarked was an "at least unusual process."

When the creditors' committee met on January 18, 2012, the decision that Manroland Augsburg should go to Possehl was unanimous. That means all union representatives present voted in favour, thereby giving their blessing to the breakup of Manroland and the accompanying mass destruction of jobs. Today, of the several thousand workers once employed in Augsburg, fewer than 600 remain in the company, which has since merged with Goss International.

In order not to jeopardise negotiations with buyer Possehl, IG Metall even cancelled a joint mass demonstration of Manroland workers from all three sites planned for January 13, 2012 in Munich. Instead, there were separate, toothless rallies and protests at the three sites with red balloons and whistles, where IG Metall functionaries loudly demanded money from government politicians for the insolvency settlement.

Offenbach: "A rigged game"

The Offenbach Manroland workers were also treated disgracefully. The works council and shop stewards maintained silence towards the workforce for months about the real sales plans. They ultimately took on the task of drawing up the list of those who were to be dismissed.

Even when the takeover by Langley Holdings had already been decided behind closed doors, union functionaries pressured workers to quickly sign termination agreements that were disadvantageous to them. Normally they would have been entitled to substantial redundancy payments for early departure. But in the interests of the sale to Langley, the bureaucrats aimed to secure the agreement of 95 percent of those affected.

Workers were thus railroaded and lost their recompense claims. First they ended up in a so-called "transfer company" and, after six months, in unemployment and dependent on welfare.

This was confirmed six months later in proceedings before Offenbach Labour Court. Several dozen former Manroland workers sued for "fraudulent deception." The lawsuit was directed against the company and insolvency administrator Werner Schneider, but during the proceedings it became clear that above all IG Metall and the works council had misled and pressured the workers.

This was made clear in court by the claimants' lawyer, Volkmar Spielmann from Hanau:

In our view, the works council reps belonged to the camp of the Manroland insolvency. In this situation, with the knowledge and intention of Manroland AG, they represented the camp of the insolvency. Works council members told workers: "If you do not sign, you will receive summary dismissal from the insolvency administrator." That was deception.

... Several works council members took over the—if I may say so—dirty work of "disposing of" half the workforce and fulfilling the conditions for a takeover.

Of the remaining 1,750 employees at the time, around 900 lost their jobs, and only 850 continued working in the newly founded Manroland Sheetfed. In order to "dress up the bride" for Langley Holdings, IG Metall also enforced the loss of many long-standing entitlements and compelled Manroland workers to accept an 8 percent wage cut and intensified work pressure.

Only the WSWS warned workers from the outset about this sell-out and encouraged them to fight resolutely for every job and mobilise the entire working class. The WSWS fought tirelessly for this programme. In the decisive three months, it wrote 15 articles, including three statements distributed at the factory gates, and organised two discussion meetings in Offenbach under the slogan: "Manroland: Defend every job!"

As early as November 24, 2011, the WSWS wrote:

The defence of jobs requires a break with the unions and the building of independent action committees. Those affected must unite internationally and fight for a socialist programme that places social needs above the profit interests of financial investors and corporations.

A statement distributed at demonstrations in Offenbach, Augsburg and Plauen on December 3, 2011 declared:

If the struggle against the threatened plant closure remains under the control of IG Metall, it is doomed to fail. That would have catastrophic consequences not only for those directly affected, but for the working class as a whole. The insolvency of Manroland is part of a comprehensive attack on the working and living conditions of the entire European working class ...

The right to work and a decent wage is an elementary democratic right. Without a permanent, well-paid job, no other needs can be satisfied.

... If company management and their co-managers in IG Metall claim that preserving jobs and wages is impossible under existing conditions, they are only saying that the capitalist profit system cannot be reconciled with the living interests and needs of the population.

The WSWS exposed the betrayal and sell-out by IG Metall relentlessly and almost in real time. Its statements circulated from hand to hand in the factory and caused great unrest because workers knew that what the WSWS wrote was true. The sell-out by IG Metall was so obvious that even the *Offenbach Post* took up the issue.

On January 21, 2012, its then editor-in-chief Frank Pröse wrote under the headline “Uneasy feelings” about the WSWS article “Manroland is being broken up with the help of the union,” which had appeared the previous day: “Yes, we are moving onto thin ice when we quote Ulrich Rippert of the *World Socialist Web Site*, who sees the breakup of ‘Manroland’ as a rigged game. But there are good reasons for this assessment.”

Rippert was addressing a “hot topic” when he accused IG Metall of having “betrayed the interests of the workforce,” wrote Pröse. It could not be denied “that the employee representatives, through their agreement to the breakup of the renowned printing press manufacturer by the Lübeck conglomerate Possehl, not only irritated the workforce.”

Struggle against the social counterrevolution

The union functionaries of the works council leadership, the shop stewards and the IG Metall headquarters reacted to the intervention of the Trotskyists with anger and hostility. When a WSWS team attempted to attend a meeting on December 7, 2011 concerning the future of the plant, they were denounced as “splitters” and thrown out of the hall.

One union official complained: “You are driving a wedge between the workers and IG Metall,” while a shop steward lamented that he had come directly from a Manroland workshop where the WSWS leaflet had caused great commotion, making it difficult for him to convince workers of IG Metall’s standpoint.

At a meeting of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party), Ulrich Rippert stressed that the right to work and a decent wage as an elementary democratic right stood higher than the profit interests of management and shareholders, and that it was necessary to build action committees and prepare a factory occupation.

Rippert said: “I am not speaking of a symbolic action, a few red flags at the main gate and limited protest actions with radical speeches, but of a serious occupation strike aimed at drawing the other sites and other factories threatened with redundancies into a broad resistance.” The insolvency had to be understood for what it really was: part of a social counterrevolution.

Today this social counterrevolution is far advanced. Many of the Manroland workers now being dismissed are being driven into unemployment and poverty in old age, and, if they are young, perhaps into the Bundeswehr (Armed Forces) and the looming war against Russia. The current Manroland closure is part of a wave of deindustrialisation that has been developing for several years and has accelerated dramatically above all with the escalation of war against Russia.

Taking the state of Hesse alone as an example: in Wetzlar, production at the 300-year-old Buderus steel concern recently came to an end; Goodyear in Fulda, the Continental plants in Wetzlar and Schwalbach and other traditional companies are being closed. At VW in Baunatal, Daimler in Kassel and Bayer in Frankfurt-Höchst, job cuts are planned. For the arms industry, however, production is flourishing.

This makes it urgently necessary for workers to take the fight for jobs into their own hands. It is a struggle for their future and that of their families, for which there is no alternative. The goal—the expropriation of the corporations and banks without compensation and the reorganisation of the economy in the interests of working people rather than shareholders—can only be achieved internationally and collectively.

Manroland alone still maintains sales and service branches in more than 40 countries.

IG Metall has not considered it necessary to unite workers across different plants—on the contrary. In order to enforce its role as the

capitalists’ junior partner, it deliberately and systematically divides workforces by site and by country.

As recently as December 2025, Manuel Schmidt, IG Metall’s chief representative in Offenbach, concluded a so-called supplementary contract for Manroland that involved numerous financial concessions. The current official IG Metall demand for a new transfer company is not even meant seriously. Many workers are no longer even at the plant because they are using up their remaining holiday entitlement.

The appeal by IG Metall representative Manuel Schmidt to the “locust” Langley is particularly miserable. According to OP-online, he demanded that Langley “must have the decency to ensure that people do not have to report to the Jobcentre on 1 June.”

The World Socialist Web Site and the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei invite all Manroland employees, all metalworkers and all their supporters to contact us and become active themselves.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact