

Germany: As unions close ranks with corporations and the state, steelworkers need international unity to defend jobs

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The IG Metall union called a day of action in the steel industry on Friday, June 12. In Berlin, several thousand steelworkers marched from the Brandenburg Gate to the Ministry of Economic Affairs for a rally. In Völklingen, the protest saw thousands of participants.

The fact that IG Metall is calling for protests shows that the steel industry is on fire. In 1990, 175,000 were still employed in the sector; now there are just 78,000 left—and almost all these jobs are in danger. IG Metall fears a rebellion, which is why it is calling for demonstrations.

But the union does not have the slightest intention of defending jobs. Every single one of the nearly 100,000 jobs destroyed over the past 36 years bore the signature of IG Metall and its works council representatives. This ensured resistance was stifled or fizzled out through “social plans,” temporary employment companies and dividing one location from another.

This is the case once again. The demands raised by the IG Metall could also have come from the employers in the German Steel Federation or management consultants EY, McKinsey or Roland Berger.

The union is not turning to the steelworkers in Europe and around the world, who are also being stripped naked and hung out to dry by the same steel corporations. It does not turn to fellow workers in the auto and engineering industries, where 10,000 jobs are being destroyed every month.

It does not call for a struggle against the corporations and billionaire investors whose greed is insatiable, while more and more workers are being impoverished. Last year alone in Germany, the number of the super-rich possessing more than \$100 million rose by 1,100 to 5,000. The same year, the poverty rate reached a historic high at 16.1 percent or 13.3 million people.

IG Metall is also not fighting the German government, which is pouring hundreds of billions into war and rearmament, while it slashes social spending, pensions, health and education. Instead, it is closing ranks with the

steelworkers’ worst enemies.

As recently as June 10, IG Metall head Christiane Benner and her deputy Jürgen Kerner sat in the Chancellery for three and a half hours with the leaders of the government—a coalition of the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) and Social Democrats (SPD)—and the chairmen of the major business associations. Together, they forged plans on how to “reform” the welfare state without provoking an uprising. No decisions were announced in order not to provoke premature resistance. But everyone knows that what is meant by “reform” are the most comprehensive social cuts since the end of the Second World War and that they agree there is no way around this.

The three core demands raised by IG Metall for its “steel pit stop in Berlin” do not defend steelworkers’ jobs, but corporate profits. The bureaucracy’s demands no longer even resemble workers’ interests.

- “*Lower energy prices, strengthen industry!*” means state-subsidised industrial electricity prices at the expense of the general public. This increases shareholder dividends and strengthens the corporations in the international trade war. Jobs are destroyed, and the working class pays for the subsidies through further social cuts. It was not for nothing that Chancellor Merz declared: “We can no longer afford the welfare state.”

- “*No place for dumping steel!*” and “Import ban on Russian steel precursors” mean protectionism and trade war, the preliminary stage to military war. IG Metall is demanding even higher import bans and tariffs on non-European steel. Yet in April, the EU already almost halved the tariff-free import volume into the European Union and imposed a punitive tariff of 50 percent on imports exceeding this.

- “*Our work counts – our jobs stay!*” reflects the legitimate desire of workers in Duisburg, Salzgitter, Bremen, Eisenhüttenstadt, Völklingen/Dillingen and other places to defend their jobs. But as we have seen, the union

bureaucracy has neither the will nor a strategy to lead such a struggle.

Jobs in the steel industry can only be defended using the methods of class struggle. There is not a single social achievement that was gifted to workers. The eight-hour day was the result of the 1918 November Revolution, payment of wages in the event of illness was the result of the 114-day metalworkers' strike in Schleswig-Holstein in 1956-57—to name just two examples.

In the age of globalisation, the defence of jobs and social rights requires an international strategy. Workers in the US, China, Asia, Africa and Europe are not opponents, but allies of workers in Germany. Their jobs, wages and social rights are also under attack because capitalism worldwide is in a desperate crisis.

For the mass of the population, capitalism means only misery, social decline, war and dictatorship. Technological advances, such as artificial intelligence, which could make life enormously easier, are instead used to destroy jobs and lower wages. A tiny oligarchy controls all of society's wealth. Elon Musk, an avowed fascist, will soon be the world's first trillionaire.

As in the First and Second World Wars, the struggle for raw materials, markets and spheres of influence is once again being fought out with violence. The financing of the war against Russia in Ukraine, the US attack on Iran and the Israeli genocide in Gaza are different fronts in this imperialist slaughter.

In closing ranks with the government and steel corporations, the union bureaucracy is not only sabotaging the defence of jobs but also making itself an accomplice of the warmongers. The preservation of the steel industry using state subsidies is now quite openly justified on military grounds.

For example, SPD chairman and Finance Minister Lars Klingbeil has declared that domestic and European quality steel must be specifically favoured and protected “for our infrastructure and defence.” For CDU military expert Roderich Kiesewetter, the production of armaments for the Bundeswehr in times of crisis is acutely endangered without domestic steel production. He therefore demands state participation in a large, national “Steel Inc.”

The Left Party and the Greens present similar demands. The Left Party also wants partial nationalisation—not to expropriate the capitalists, but to protect the steel industry from international competition using public funds. Mirze Edis, Left Party parliamentarian and simultaneously a works council member at the Krupp Mannesmann steelworks in Duisburg, put it plainly. “We need a defence army. And if you want to set up a defence army well, you also need steel.”

That is the reason why the union invited Green Party chairman Felix Banaszak and Left Party chairwoman Ines Schwerdtner as speakers at the rally in front of the Ministry of Economic Affairs, alongside works council reps and personnel directors, i.e., representatives of the corporations. As opposition politicians, they are not as hated as government politicians, but they represent the same nationalist war course. If it were up to them, steelworkers would produce steel for tanks and other weapons with which their sons and daughters would be sent to war and to their deaths. Hitler already “created jobs” in this way.

The interests of the steelworkers in Duisburg, Bochum, Salzgitter and Eisenhüttenstadt are identical to those of the steelworkers in India, France, Russia and China: all want jobs, good wages, dignified living conditions and no wars.

To enforce these common interests, it is necessary to take action now:

- In the factories, independent rank-and-file committees must be elected by the workforce and controlled by them. Union officials have no business being in them.
- In the struggle against globally operating corporations, a joint struggle with workers worldwide is necessary, not tariff walls and national isolation.
- If Thyssenkrupp, ArcelorMittal and Salzgitter are unable to maintain jobs and social benefits, they must be expropriated and placed under the democratic control of the workers. Production must be organised according to social need—not according to shareholder dividends and the requirements of war.

The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party) fights for this perspective. We say openly to steelworkers: The decision you make today is fundamental. Either you follow the IG Metall bureaucracy down the familiar path of Opel, Ford and the former steel production locations—which means the gradual dismantling of plants, “social plans” and unemployment. Or you organise yourselves independently and fight on a socialist and internationalist basis.



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