Jobs massacre at Bosch: Appliance giant to close washing machine plant near Berlin

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The author of this article, Andy Niklaus, is a candidate of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) in the Berlin state election. Further information about Niklaus, the other candidates and the SGP's programme and election campaign can be found here.

The jobs massacre at Bosch not only affects its automotive supply division. In the middle of next year, Bosch subsidiary BSH, originally Bosch-Siemens Hausgeräte GmbH and now a wholly owned subsidiary of the Bosch group, is closing its washing machine factory in Nauen in Brandenburg, northwest of Berlin; 450 jobs will be lost.

In total, 1,400 jobs are to be cut at BSH. In addition to Nauen, the plant in Bretten in Baden-Württemberg is also to be closed. The reason given was declining demand. Production of electric cookers, washing machines and extractor hoods is in future to be taken over by other European plants. BSH employs around 16,000 workers in Germany and 57,000 worldwide.

As in the automotive division, IG Metall—Germany's largest industrial trade union—is organising the slash and burn. The BSH washing machine factory in the eastern German town of Nauen on the outskirts of Berlin was created jointly by Bosch and Siemens in 1994, five years after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the restoration of capitalism in East Germany. It had been set up as a low-cost alternative to the nearby plant in the West Berlin district of Spandau-Gartenfeld. Unlike their counterparts in western Germany, the Nauen workers have to this day never been covered by an industry-wide collective wage agreement (Tarifvertrag), which sets pay and conditions across an entire sector. The IG Metall union has vigorously supported this division of workers between East and West and the resulting poverty wages, which it hypocritically denounces.

When some €90 million was invested in Nauen in 2005 to build a new highly profitable washing machine factory, the state of Brandenburg under State Premier Matthias Platzeck (Social Democratic Party, SPD) contributed €9.3 million. The plant in Nauen nevertheless lost 230 jobs due to the relocation of tumble-dryer production to Lodz in Poland. For the plant in Spandau-Gartenfeld that was the death blow.

At the time, the BSH works council and IG Metall officials declared that the "washing machine of the future" could also have been produced in Gartenfeld. But employees in Nauen earned over 10 percent less than their colleagues in Berlin and worked a 43-hour week rather than 35 hours. "Our Berlin site does not function economically," said BSH spokeswoman Eva Delabre at the time. "In Nauen, we can produce economically; we don't have the area-wide collective agreement, but we do have the maximum in working flexibility."

The plant in Berlin-Spandau closed on June 30, 2012. Its fate had been sealed six years earlier: in October 2006 IG Metall signed an agreement that effectively authorised the wind-down, and in 2012 the union drew up the accompanying redundancy scheme. Three years later, in 2015, Siemens exited production as part of its transformation into a financial holding company. Bosch took over all of Siemens' shares in BSH.

IG Metall has allowed the Nauen employees to toil as second-class workers for 33 years, without benefits enjoyed by their counterparts in the west such as holiday pay, Christmas bonuses, shift supplements and special payments, at times for 50 hours a week. The union has not lifted a finger to change this. Only last year did contract negotiations begin, which were then rendered superfluous by the announcement of the closure and were broken off.

Production in Nauen will end in mid-2027; initially only the logistics operation is to remain. The works council has concluded a redundancy scheme with the familiar conditions and rules for closure: severance payments, early retirement, a temporary transfer employment company.

When Bosch announced almost a year ago that it intended to destroy 22,000 jobs in total, it was clear that this would predominantly affect the automotive division, but not exclusively. Bosch is a global corporation with four major divisions: Mobility, Industrial Technology, Consumer Goods and Energy and Building Technology.

The group, with over 400,000 employees worldwide and revenues of over €90 billion, is under no serious commercial threat. It is not incurring losses. On the contrary, it made a profit of €3.5 billion in 2024 and wanted to double that this year. Moreover, the BSH plant in Nauen always operated at a profit, according to the works council chairwoman, Jeannette Luschnat.

Rather, the attacks on jobs and wages are part of the escalating trade wars and military wars over markets and profits. The United States is waging war against Iran, supporting Israel's genocide in Palestine, attacking Venezuela and threatening Cuba.

The European powers—above all Germany—are de facto at war with Russia. Germany is the largest financial backer of the Zelensky regime and, jointly with Ukraine, is building weapons that are being deployed against Russia. The costs of the "war readiness" sought by Chancellor Merz (Christian Democrat) and Defence Minister Pistorius (Social Democrat) are paid by the working class—through plant closures, wage cuts and production relocations and the conversion of plants to a war economy. Bosch too is increasingly attempting to sell its electronic and digital components to weapons producers.

Like all corporations, Bosch works closely with the IG Metall apparatus. The IG Metall officials Nadine Boguslawski, Adrian Hermes and Dr Raphael Menez, as well as the works council chairs, sit on the supervisory board of Robert Bosch GmbH and collect supervisory board emoluments on top of their already high salaries. The attacks on the workforce are drawn up and agreed there, and the respective regional and plant-level IG Metall apparatus then implements them.

When opposition from assembly line workers against the massive job cuts at the Bosch plant in Schwäbisch Gmünd coalesced at the end of last year into the Free Metalworkers, the union apparatus struck back mercilessly. The site is being run down to around 1,700 by 2030, from once over 6,000 employees.

The IG Metall apparatus deliberately plays the individual sites off against one another. Nauen and Bretten are being closed. Waiblingen, Sebnitz and Leinfelden-Echterdingen are losing their production. The Mondeville plant in France is also being closed. Jobs are being cut in Bursa in Türkiye.

In Brandenburg and Berlin, alongside the trade unions, the Left Party always plays a significant role in ensuring that workers' protests come to nothing. In the case of the BSH plants in Nauen and Spandau-Gartenfeld, the Left Party leaves behind a trail of devastation.

In September 2006, when the Spandau BSH employees in Gartenfeld went on strike against the plant closure, Gregor Gysi, then leader of the Left Party's parliamentary group in the Bundestag (Germany's federal parliament), appeared on IG Metall strike platforms and delivered a polished criticism of the Siemens leadership.

For five months in 2002, Gysi was Economics Senator (state minister) in the Berlin state executive in the coalition with the SPD under Klaus Wowereit (SPD). This government, in which the right-wing extremist Thilo Sarrazin (then SPD) was Finance Senator and Harald Wolf (Left Party) was Economics Senator after Gysi, first bailed out the bankrupt state-owned Berlin bank, Berliner Bankgesellschaft, with over €21 billion, then proceeded to claw this money back from Berliners through massive cuts. The public sector shed 35,000 jobs, wages were reduced by up to 12 percent, social infrastructure was slashed and 150,000 council apartments were sold off to property sharks.

Today, Left Party leaders Heidi Reichinnek, Bodo Ramelow and perform this work. They invite workers to the Bundestag, give speeches about "solidarity" and "co-determination" (worker representation on company boards) and stage parliamentary displays of sympathy, all without ever questioning the corporate decisions on plant closures, relocations and job cuts.

For example, Left Party MP Ince, until early 2025 a VW works councillor for IG Metall in Salzgitter, invited a delegation from the Nauen workforce to the Bundestag and delivered a speech in their presence about the merits of co-determination. He advocated a legislative proposal from the Left Party that gives the works council a "compulsory co-determination right" on economic decisions. In case of dispute, a conciliation body is to decide.

Ince knows perfectly well, of course, that the VW works council under Daniela Cavallo has such a right. Nothing happens at Volkswagen without it. The VW works council has used this right to agree to the elimination of 35,000 jobs and a wage cut of up to 20 percent. It is now negotiating over the destruction of up to 140,000 jobs and the closure of four plants. This fusion of corporate and trade union leaderships, called "co-determination," is not the solution but the problem.

As long as decisions over production, investment and sites remain in the hands of corporate executive boards, shareholders and IG Metall officials, workers will always come off worst.

Bosch workers, VW employees, electrical workers, steelworkers at ThyssenKrupp, public sector employees, nurses, bus drivers and millions of others can only win if they organise themselves independently and democratically and are ready to fight—in rank-and-file action committees that grow out of the workforce itself.

Union bureaucrats and parliamentary deputies who prattle about "co-determination" and "social partnership" while simultaneously destroying jobs, cutting wages and closing entire plants must be kept out of the action committees.

The action committees, whose democratically elected spokespersons are accountable and removable at any time, must make contact with workers in other workplaces. Only in this way can the divisions from plant to plant, sector to sector and country to country be overcome.

Workers' interests must take precedence over profit interests. The power of the corporations over jobs, wages and production must be taken away from them. They must be transferred into public ownership under democratic workers' control. Expropriation rather than profit maximisation—that is the imperative of the hour.