

Fain's "international solidarity" with IG Metall: The unity of the trade union bureaucracies against the working class

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United Auto Workers President Shawn Fain issued a video statement Monday voicing his "solidarity" with the protests organized by Germany's IG Metall union against job cuts at VW, BMW, Porsche and other automakers. Auto companies on both sides of the Atlantic made billions in profits, he said, and "now they want layoffs, plant closures and concessions." International solidarity means "workers standing across borders, across companies, and across languages," he said, concluding: "IG Metall, the UAW stands with you in full solidarity."

This rhetoric comes from the mouth of one of the most prominent supporters of Trump's trade war measures. Fain has repeatedly boasted that the UAW meets regularly with administration officials on auto and heavy truck tariffs, while he has not lifted a finger to defend the thousands of workers in Canada and Mexico being thrown out of their jobs by the UAW-backed tariffs.

The fraud at the center of Fain's remarks is exposed by the very organization he embraces. IG Metall is implementing, not fighting the jobs massacre in Germany. On September 3, IG Metall representatives voted for a further 50,000 job cuts at Volkswagen at a secret overnight meeting of the supervisory board, which the union holds seats on. This is on top of the 35,000 jobs and the up to 20 percent cut in wages IG Metall agreed to in December 2024, claiming this would prevent plant closures.

"I had hoped the measures agreed in 2024 would already be sufficient," VW executive Thomas Schaefer said earlier this week. "Unfortunately, that has not been the case. We have absolutely no time to lose and will therefore significantly step up our performance program once again." Overall, the German auto industry—with the complicity of IG Metall—has destroyed some 100,000 jobs since 2019, with a further 125,000 to follow by 2035.

Among German workers, there is broad support for collective action to fight the cuts. But the September 21 "Day of Action" did not include any work stoppages. Instead, IG Metall held a series of rather poorly attended break time rallies. In Düsseldorf, 1,200 out of 5,000 Mercedes-Benz workers protested between 2 p.m. and 2:30 p.m. At Ford in Cologne, the protest lasted less than five minutes and was essentially a photo op. At Bosch in Stuttgart, 300 employees participated out of a total workforce of 15,000.

IG Metall head Christiane Benner used the event to call for stronger anti-Chinese tariffs, more EU subsidies to the auto giants and the continuation of "phased retirement." The German unions have endorsed Berlin's rearmament and war course, backing war credits of at least €1 trillion (US\$1.1 trillion), the trade war against China and austerity.

At Monday's protests in Germany, the VW Action Committee, affiliated with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), distributed a statement that said, "Which side the IG Metall leadership and its bureaucratic apparatus stand on is not an open question. Everyone knows they crossed over to the other side of the barricade long ago." It advanced a fighting program that called for the defense of every job, the breaking of the control of the IG Metall apparatus, and no war production, urging workers to build independent rank-and-file action committees and counter the nationalist program of the union bureaucracy with the international unity of the working class.

The UAW bureaucracy has long coveted the position IG Metall occupies within the German capitalist state and has sought at different times to emulate it with seats on the boards of directors of the US automakers. Under the state-sanctioned system of "co-determination," IG Metall

director Benner received more than €380,000 (US\$418,000) last year for her VW supervisory board membership alone—and she sits on several boards. Former IG Metall official Bernd Osterloh leveraged his position as a “co-manager” at VW to get a position as a corporate executive at its truck subsidiary Traton with an annual salary of €750,000 (US\$825,000).

The UAW and IG Metall bureaucracies formed an alliance in 2015 with the explicit aim of expanding “the principle of ‘co-determination’ between management and employees by establishing German-style works councils or similar bodies to promote employee representation.” That is the meaning of Fain’s statement in the video that “IG Metall had our backs” during union organizing drives at German automakers in the US southern states.

Most fundamentally, the UAW promotes the same anti-Chinese and militarist program from the standpoint of the interests of American, rather than German imperialism. Fain’s video was apparently pre-recorded at the UAW Community Action Program meeting in Lansing, Michigan, on September 14-16, where he and Democratic Senate candidate Abdul El-Sayed denounced Trump’s suggestion that Chinese companies might build factories in the US as a “betrayal,” railing against the “violation of national security interests” and Chinese “slave labor.”

This is the same chauvinist filth behind “Buy American” campaigns and smashing of Japanese cars in the 1980s that led to the murder of Chinese American engineer Vincent Chin in Detroit. It is also a signal that the UAW bureaucracy can be depended on to suppress working class resistance to American imperialism’s wars for global domination.

Fain has repeatedly invoked the World War II “Arsenal of Democracy” to sanctify the conversion of the plants to war production, even as GM delivers components to Lockheed Martin for Patriot missiles. In World War II, the UAW enforced the no-strike pledge to keep war production running. Today it is preparing to play the same role, imposing labor discipline to churn out the tanks, planes, missiles and ammunition needed for a new world war.

Fain’s “solidarity” with IG Metall is not the solidarity of workers, but of bureaucrats—a mutual defense pact among the privileged strata whose positions depend on suppressing the class struggle and subordinating workers to their respective national ruling classes. Fain stands with the IG Metall apparatus because he recognizes in it a brother bureaucracy facing the same threat: the emergence of an independent, international movement of the rank

and file.

That threat found expression just hours before Fain’s statement was posted on social media, when workers from the United States, Europe, Canada and Mexico took part in an online meeting with Will Lehman, the rank-and-file Mack Trucks worker and socialist candidate for UAW president. The September 20 meeting, titled, “For rank-and-file power and the international unity of the working class,” co-sponsored by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), outlined a genuine international strategy against the global assault on jobs, trade war, militarism and dictatorship.

Lehman told the meeting: “Any autoworker who walks around their own plant can see that parts are made from all over the world. So, the reality is we can’t be separated from each other and succeed in any kind of struggle. The union likes to promote this fallacy. They’ve done so for decades. And they’ve lost. The reason they lost is because they’re nationalist.”

The international unification of the working class—the most powerful force on the planet—requires a rebellion against the nationalist union apparatus and the building of rank-and-file organizations in every workplace. It requires the transfer of power from the bureaucrats to the shop floor, and the perspective of socialist internationalism for which the Socialist Equality Party and the IWA-RFC fight.

Fain’s appeal to IG Metall is a measure of the crisis confronting the union bureaucracy. The task of autoworkers in the United States, Germany, Canada, Mexico and around the world is to answer this conspiracy of the apparatuses with the organization of their own independent power.



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