Defend all jobs at GSK’s Dresden vaccine plant in Germany!

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23 September 2026

On September 11, British pharmaceutical giant GlaxoSmithKline (GSK) announced it would close its vaccine plant in Dresden, Germany. Production is to end in late September 2027, with the site to be fully shut down by summer 2028. The 641 employees face unemployment.

The Saxony Serum Plant Dresden (Sächsisches Serumwerk Dresden), as it is traditionally known, was founded in 1911. It once supplied the whole of East Germany (GDR) with vaccines and today mainly produces seasonal and pandemic influenza vaccines, which are exported to more than 70 countries. According to the company, the vaccines produced in Dresden have protected more than a billion people. This experience and the production culture built up over generations are now to be destroyed.

The workforce was taken completely by surprise. One employee told the press, “It was quite a shock.”

Global cost-cutting programme

On July 28, six weeks before the Dresden announcement, GSK’s new CEO Luke Miels presented a three-year programme called “Accelerate Growth,” which is set to deliver annual savings of £1.9 billion ($2.53 billion) by 2029. Forty percent of the savings are to come from “redirecting resources from mature products to specialty medicines.”

According to corporate management, the Dresden plant produces a “mature product” whose resources are to be redirected elsewhere. The trade publication *FiercePharma* explicitly makes this connection in its reporting. The excuses the company leadership now offers for the closure—falling demand for egg-based flu vaccine, WHO preferences and US vaccine policy—are merely an after-the-fact justification for a decision taken months ago.

Along with the cost-cutting programme, GSK announced the same day that it would close its historic research and development centre in Stevenage, England, after 50 years. Around 1,800 people work there. Some 1,000 of them are to move to three new buildings on the Cambridge Biomedical Campus, and a few more to modernised laboratories. The relocation is to be completed by 2029. GSK presents it as a relocation rather than a cut, but concedes there will be job losses, without saying how many. The move is tied to an investment of £400 million ($532m) in GSK’s UK sites.

Immediately after the cost-cutting programme was announced, GSK’s share price rose 6 percent on the London Stock Exchange.

The Dresden jobs are therefore being destroyed not because GSK lacks money or because the product is not needed, but to secure a high profit margin for shareholders. In its second-quarter 2026 report, GSK even raised its profit forecast for the vaccines business.

Shareholders are shown the whole programme in figures, while workers learn of it one plant at a time. This approach is designed to stop workers across all sites from responding together to what is a common attack.

The strategy of the union and works council

In contrast to the company’s global strategy, the politicians and the union are pursuing a narrow, nationalist policy of defending each site in isolation, which is meant to cloud workers’ view of the broader context and can only lead to defeat.

A week after the announcement in Germany, the works council and the Mining, Chemical and Energy Industrial Union (IGBCE) declared they would now develop a “robust plan for the future” together with outside experts. This would examine which new vaccines, medicines and contract manufacturing could be brought to Dresden, whether the site could be operated independently or with partners, and which political and European instruments could be brought to bear—including the planned European Critical Medicines Act.

There should be no illusions about the character of such a “plan for the future,” and there is no need to guess. The past experience is unambiguous.

The model is the Görlitz railway carriage plant. After years of uncertainty and a search for an investor in which the IG Metall union was involved “at all levels,” arms manufacturer KNDS took over the Alstom site at the beginning of 2025. Of around 700 employees, KNDS is taking on 350 to 400 in Görlitz; up to 75 more are receiving offers at other KNDS sites and 100 at other Alstom sites. The transition runs until 2027.

Only a little over half of the workforce remains at the site itself. And instead of double-decker carriages and trams, the plant now produces components for the Leopard 2 main battle tank, the Puma infantry fighting vehicle and the Boxer wheeled armoured vehicle. The deal was announced in the presence of the German Chancellor and of Saxony’s State Premier, Michael Kretschmer—the same man who is now promising “comprehensive support” in Dresden. Some of the workers in Görlitz are being laid off. Others now work under worse conditions, building the weapons with which they or their children will be sent to war. That is the logic of nationalist, site-by-site politics.

Often the so-called “plan for the future” is merely a step on the road to unemployment for all the workers. In another case, an “interim rescue company” took over the Domo chemical plant in Leuna this April following the insolvency of its previous owner—almost exactly the “model” now to be examined for Dresden.

Five months later, the search for an investor had definitively failed. Production is to be halted at the end of September, with the plant run down within 15 to 20 days and then emptied and cleaned. Some 400 employees are still needed for the shutdown and dismantling. The small workforce that remains is there only to dismantle the plant.

An investor buys production capacity only if it is profitable—and it becomes profitable with fewer staff, lower wages and public subsidies. Every interested party will set precisely this as a condition. From the first page, the “plan for the future” is therefore a plan that sacrifices some of the 641 jobs in order to offer the rest to an investor.

Futile wage sacrifice in 2024

The GSK workforce in Dresden has already had its own experiences with these schemes. After orders collapsed in 2024, the works council and management jointly cut the working week by 3.5 hours with a corresponding loss of wages. This amounted to giving up around 9 percent of gross income.

At the time, it was claimed that this had prevented just over 100 threatened job cuts. The project was even nominated for the German Works Council Award (Deutscher Betriebsräte-Preis), presented annually by the trade journal *Arbeitsrecht im Betrieb* (*Labour Law in the Workplace*), and celebrated in the magazine of the Hans Böckler Foundation, which is close to the Social Democratic Party (SPD), as “job preservation through solidarity.”

But today, two years later, the closure of the plant is now on the agenda. Through their wage sacrifice GSK employees merely postponed the closure, and bought the company time to prepare the relocation.

The nationalist dead end

The plant once operated as Saxony Serum Plant Dresden, which as a state-owned enterprise (Volkseigener Betrieb, VEB) was East Germany’s most important vaccine supplier. It was handed over to the Treuhand—the agency set up to privatise East German state enterprises—in 1990. In 1992, it was sold to SmithKline Beecham, which merged with Glaxo Wellcome in 2000 to form GlaxoSmithKline.

The Dresden vaccine plant was one of the sites that survived the fall of the Berlin Wall and political upheavals of 1989–90 that led to German reunification, as the export arm of a global corporation. This integration of the plant into the capitalist world market, hailed at the time as its salvation, is now proving to be an instrument of its destruction.

That a vaccine plant, of all things, is to be closed only a few years after the outbreak of the COVID pandemic is not only an insult to the employees but affects all workers. For the sake of corporate profits, not only are jobs being destroyed, but public health is being ruined. At least 180,000 people in Germany have died of COVID as a result of the “profits before lives” policy, and now the dismantling of the vaccine industry is beginning.

It is therefore particularly cynical that the “plan for the future” argues some production must be kept to ensure “strategic autonomy” in vaccines and medicines—autonomy that is seen as crucial in the event of war. In other words, workers who serve public health are to lose their jobs, but if they can be put to use for the war economy, a reduced workforce may keep working, for lower wages. And the unions even call this a success!

Build an independent action committee at the vaccine plant!

These attacks can only be fought and all jobs defended if workers are clear about the context in which the destruction of their jobs is taking place. In Germany, hundreds of thousands of industrial jobs are currently being destroyed in order to make the country “fit for war” (in the words of the SPD Defence Minister) and to boost profits. The defence of jobs must therefore be linked to the struggle against the policy of war and the enrichment of the wealthy. The fight to defend jobs at GSK must be understood as part of this struggle.

To do this, the workforce must take the leadership of this struggle into its own hands. What is needed is an independent rank-and-file action committee, elected by the workers, accountable solely to the workforce, without full-time union officials and without confidentiality clauses that hide the truth from workers.

Such a committee must proceed from the following principles:

- **No layoffs, no closure, no severance plan!** Full preservation of all jobs and production in Dresden, with no loss of pay.
- **Disclosure of all business figures.** The workforce has a right to know the state of the order book, capacity planning, relocation targets and the actual costs of the site—not in confidential supervisory board and business committee sessions, but publicly.
- **Workers’ control instead of liquidation.** If a company declares that a functioning vaccine plant is not profitable enough for it, then the question of ownership arises. Vaccine production is a matter of public health and must not be subordinated to the drive for profits. The site must be placed under workers’ control and operated as part of a socially planned health system whose yardstick is need, not profit.
- **Unite with workers across plants and borders.** GSK is a transnational corporation. Fellow workers in Belgium, Britain and Canada face the same corporate board and the same drive for profit.
- **Link up with other workforces in the region and beyond.** Whether at heat exchanger manufacturer Kelvion, at VW in Zwickau, or at chemical and supplier plants across Saxony and Thuringia, it is one and the same attack, carried out by the same institutions and accompanied by the same assurances from politicians. The billions spent on rearmament are being taken from health care, production and wages.

Don’t wait for management to call plant meetings, don’t wait for a rotten compromise. Get in touch with us, discuss this perspective and build an action committee as part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact