

Massive wave of job cuts in the German chemical industry

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15 October 2026

A massive wave of job cuts is looming in the German chemical industry. Three weeks ago, Evonik CEO Claus Rettig asserted he would accelerate the restructuring of the leading German chemical company. Sites in Germany are being closed and relocated, and subsidiaries are being sold. In total, Evonik plans to cut nearly 11,000 of its more than 31,000 jobs worldwide.

Back in June, Evonik announced plans to cut an additional 3,200 jobs worldwide by 2029, including 2,150 jobs in Germany. For example, the Evonik plants in Witten (with just over 260 employees), Hamburg and Bitterfeld are scheduled to close next year. Combined with existing cost-cutting programs that have been in place since 2023, the planned job cuts at Evonik totalled 6,000 posts.

Now, major divisions of the company, such as the chemical site operator Syneqt—with about 3,500 jobs—and the Evonik subsidiary Oxeno—with about 900 employees—are also to be sold. Syneqt operates the Marl Chemical Park, where nearly 10,000 people are employed, more than 6,000 of whom work for Evonik.

Evonik emerged in 2007 from the business divisions of the Ruhrkohle AG (RAG) that were not directly related to coal mining. The largest shareholder, with just under 44 percent, is the RAG Foundation. The foundation, in turn, uses the proceeds to finance its so-called “perpetual obligations” associated with coal mining, which was finally phased out in 2018.

This phrase refers to the long-term costs of mining, particularly mine water management and groundwater remediation. Without these perpetual obligations—whose costs, according to a 2006 expert report, amount to approximately 13 billion euros—large parts of the Ruhr region would be underwater. Over the past 130 years, the former coal-mining region has subsided by up to 25 meters in some places, and in some areas even more.

Now Rettig wants to expand Evonik, particularly in Asia and the Americas. “We are a multinational company,” he emphasized. He aims for a balanced distribution of revenue across the global regions of Europe, Asia, and the Americas. “The world is becoming more unpredictable. That’s why we need to become more flexible.” For example, Evonik recently

invested in the healthcare and biotechnology sectors in Canada and Slovakia.

The Evonik Executive Board’s cost-cutting spree and the resulting hoped-for profit increases have now also drawn the chemical giant BASF into the fray. Earlier this month, BASF submitted a takeover bid, reportedly amounting to around ten billion euros.

The Social Democratic Party (SPD) in North Rhine-Westphalia has requested a state parliament debate on Evonik for 14 October. In the debate, the SPD intends to compel state premier Hendrik Wüst (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) to oppose the takeover. Wüst is a member of the board of trustees of the RAG Foundation. Although the foundation had previously stated that it would reduce its stake in Evonik to just 25.1 percent in order to retain its veto power as an anchor shareholder, following BASF’s offer, the RAG Foundation clarified that, according to its bylaws, a complete sale is also possible.

In its motion to the state parliament, the SPD calls on the CDU-Green state government, among other things, to consider a state investment in Evonik to prevent the takeover by BASF. “The state government must not allow Evonik to become a pawn in corporate decisions made in Ludwigshafen [BASF’s headquarters],” says SPD state parliamentary group leader Jochen Ott. This is not about just any stock market deal, but “about the question of what such a takeover means for the people who work here.”

This form of local protectionism directed against a multinational corporation is reactionary and serves as a backdrop to the planned layoffs. Neither the SPD nor the IG BCE (IG Mining, Chemical, Energy) union cares about “the people who work here.”

Interim CEO Rettig, who took over as chairman of the executive board from the ailing Christian Kullmann in early September, knows that for decades the IG BCE has not stood in the way of corporate interests at the expense of employees. He wants to implement the cutbacks swiftly: “We’re not holding back on anything. We have a solid program that’s well prepared. Now it’s a matter of consistent implementation.”

The “solid program” is called “Evonik Tailor Made” and has been extended from the end of 2026 into 2029. “Everything is

supposed to be implemented by 2030,” explains the Evonik CEO.

Among other measures, vacant positions will not be refilled. Older employees are to retire earlier, and a severance program is intended to encourage younger employees to leave their jobs.

IG BCE leader Michael Vassiliadis has already agreed to this and would also give his blessing to a takeover of Evonik by BASF. Alongside Wüst, Federal Minister of Economics Katherina Reiche (CDU), and Finance Minister Lars Klingbeil (SPD), Vassiliadis is a member of the RAG Foundation’s board of trustees and also serves on BASF’s supervisory board.

He and the IG BCE are offering to implement the restructuring of the chemical industry. As recently as March, they had agreed to significant real wage cuts with the chemical companies. Now, a statement from the IG BCE executive board reads: “The further cost-cutting and workforce measures announced by Evonik mark a major turning point for the company and its employees.” However: “It is now crucial for the IG BCE that the agreed-upon protective measures take effect and that the announced restructuring is consistently carried out in a spirit of social partnership.”

The IG BCE’s concern is not about jobs, but about the chemical companies’ revenues. “The most important thing now is to improve the revenue side as well,” explained Alexander Bercht, a member of the IG BCE’s executive board and deputy chairman of Evonik’s supervisory board. He says the developments at Evonik reflect the profound challenges facing the chemical industry in Germany and Europe, namely “high costs, weak demand, and intensified international competition.”

Like the IG Metall union, the IG BCE is acting as a spokesperson for the corporations and calling for government support for them. What is important, according to Bercht—who has no objection to the short-term elimination of jobs—is an “industrial policy that enables investment, strengthens competitiveness, and secures good industrial jobs in the long term.”

Evonik is not an isolated case. Last year, production and revenue in the chemical industry fell by 3.3 and 3.8 percent, respectively. Since 2022, industry revenue has dropped by about 22 percent. However, the number of employees has fallen by only about 7,000 during this period, to a current total of 471,000. Plant capacity utilization stood at just 70 percent in the last quarter of 2025. Now, the workforce is to be adjusted accordingly. In a recent survey by the German Chemical Industry Association (VCI), 20 percent of companies stated that they intended to relocate or shut down production. One in ten companies was considering plant closures.

For example, BASF cut approximately 7,000 jobs worldwide from January 2024 through the end of June 2026; fewer than 95,000 people currently work for the industry leader. The chemical company Wacker plans to cut more than 1,500 of its 16,000 jobs by 2027.

Lanxess is cutting another 550 of its 11,500 jobs by 2028,

two-thirds of which are in Germany, primarily in administrative roles. A total of 870 jobs had already been cut previously. In addition, the company has agreed with the works council and the IG BCE union to reduce the weekly workweek for its employees covered by collective bargaining agreements by 2.5 hours to 35 hours per week without compensation. The company has not reduced the dividend for shareholders.

In the East German “chemical triangle,” where over 35,000 people are employed, DOMO Chemicals filed for bankruptcy at the turn of the year for its Leuna site, which employs around 600 people. Dow Chemicals also plans to partially withdraw from the region. By the end of 2027, approximately 800 jobs are set to be cut in Böhlen and Schkopau.

The corporations justify their cost-cutting plans to their workforces by citing overcapacity, high energy prices and insufficient plant utilization. Evonik speaks of a “structural and economic crisis” in the industry.

And as with Evonik, the IG BCE, together with its works councils, is ensuring that the job cuts proceed smoothly—through “natural turnover,” i.e., not filling vacant positions, partial retirement and early retirement, as well as severance payments.

Preserving and defending jobs is not the IG BCE’s goal, as Vassiliadis and Bercht recently wrote to the works councils at BASF and Evonik. The goal, they argue, must be to “finally” strengthen Germany as a chemical industry hub “once again” rather than beginning “yet another round of its weakening.”

The events of recent years as a whole—and especially the current layoff plans—make it necessary for workers to organize independently of the IG BCE bureaucracy and its works councils. The bureaucrats who sit on supervisory and works councils and are handsomely compensated for their work in the interests of shareholders represent their own material interests, which have nothing to do with those of the workforce. Chemical workers must unite against this apparatus in action committees to fend off the massive attack on their jobs and wages and to defend their workplaces.

We call on all workers in the chemical industry to contact us about this. Fill out the form below or send a message via WhatsApp to +491633378340.



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