Warning strikes at over 2,000 workplaces in Germany, but the IG Metall union is trying to prevent an all-out strike

Dietmar Gaisenkersting
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After more than 120,000 young people demonstrated in over 30 cities in Germany last Saturday against the destruction of education, exploding living costs, social inequality, rearmament and the reintroduction of conscription, tens of thousands of workers walked out on Monday at more than 2,000 sites across the country.

At the start of the week, the union IG Metall called a first wave of limited "warning strikes" in the ongoing wage dispute in the metal and electrical industries. The sector, which includes arms manufacturing, mechanical engineering and the auto and supplier industries, among others, employs around 3.7 million people. This does not include the 130,000 Volkswagen employees in Germany, for whom IG Metall is negotiating a separate new company agreement in parallel.

In the second round of negotiations, the metal and electrical employers demanded wage cuts and threatened job losses. IG Metall then felt compelled to call warning strikes. Many workers took part in these time-limited strikes and protests, including at Audi, Liebherr, Mercedes, Miele, Philips, Rolls-Royce, Schaeffler, ZF and Siemens. In North Rhine-Westphalia alone, more than 16,000 workers at 235 sites took part.

The workforces are highly mobilised. In many workplaces, workers are discussing whether the wage round must become the start of an indefinite strike against the massive destruction of jobs and constant deterioration of working conditions. Workers are also affected by the same problems that are driving millions of young people across Europe onto the streets: unaffordable fuel prices, rent increases and large-scale military rearmament financed by sweeping social cuts. According to a Forsa poll, 83 percent of the population support the youth protests.

But the IG Metall leadership is desperately trying to stop the spark of the youth rebellion from leaping to the working class. It wants to confine the warning strikes to the immediate wage issues and is working closely with corporate boards to prevent a wildfire. Together, the companies and union leadership aim to cut the corporations' costs at the expense of the workers.

This is shown by an interview that Bertram Brossardt, head of the Bavarian metal industry employers' association, gave to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, in which he calls for a "moratorium on burdens" for the industry. In practice, this means cuts in real wages and an extension of so-called "automatic differentiation," the option of simply scrapping pay rises and special payments when the return on sales falls below 2.3 percent. Weekly working time is to be increased by three hours to 38.

In addition, Brossardt is demanding a contractual obligation to hold talks on reducing sickness absence and on the use of artificial intelligence. High sickness absence rates in Germany, he said, were a cost problem that must be "permanently reduced." Behind this lies an attack on the right to continued payment of wages during sickness and on working conditions as a whole. According to Brossardt, workers at companies in crisis can be expected to accept a "pause for breath" (i.e., in receiving wages); after all, "in the end they are glad if they keep their jobs."

The employers' offer in the second round of talks with IG Metall was correspondingly brazen. They are proposing a one-off payment of 1 percent of annual gross pay (€555 to around €800) in mid-2027. This is to be subject to "differentiation," meaning that many workers would not receive it. Monthly pay is to rise by only 1.3 percent, and not until July 1, 2028—21 months from now. The contract would end five months later.

IG Metall practically provoked this audacious stance with its low demand of 5 percent more pay over a contract term of 12 months. As we wrote at the start of the wage round, the union is prepared to agree to deep real wage cuts.

IG Metall chief negotiator Nadine Boguslawski argues along similar lines to Brossardt. Order books at two thirds of companies were "good or very good," she said, whereas at one third—"particularly in the auto industry or mechanical engineering"—they were poor. IG Metall wanted to "do justice" to this.

IG Metall had already offered a "moderate settlement"—that is, a pay cut—in advance, and in return demanded "profit-sharing" at well-performing companies. Daniel Friedrich, head of IG Metall's Coastal district, declared: "For some employees, securing their job is the priority." In doing so, the union had adopted the employers' argument and turned the principle of "equal pay for equal work" on its head. It is dividing the workers in the supposedly "booming companies"—the weapons, aerospace and energy technology industries—from auto and mechanical engineering workers, in order to attack the latter with full force.

Brossardt's self-assured arrogance has a cause that goes beyond the current wage round. The Bavarian employers' chief knows full

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well that in IG Metall he is dealing not with a workers' organisation, but with a bureaucratic apparatus that has become the extended arm of corporate management—and that is financially dependent on the companies. He made this unmistakably clear to the union in the summer, ahead of the wage negotiations.

Speaking on June 16, Brossardt and Richard Giesen, professor of labour law at Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich, criticised the bonus arrangements for union members that IG Metall was pushing. It was not the employers' job, Brossardt said, "to win members for a trade union indirectly through a bonus." The message was clear: the corporations finance the union apparatus—and can end that financing.

The arrangements give IG Metall members additional bonuses at workplace level to which non-members are not entitled—one-off payments, days off, benefits in kind, recuperation allowances, additional severance pay and so on. At VW, a union members' bonus agreed from 2027 starts at €254 a year and rises to €1,271 by 2030. At Audi, members receive €500 more this year and as much as €1,250 by 2029. At Mahle in Neustadt an der Donau, 400 employees are losing their jobs. As a reward for the union having arranged the plant closure, IG Metall members receive a further €3.25 million in total on top of the severance payments.

The mechanism is a transparent bribe. Union dues are 1 percent of gross pay, i.e., between €300 and €600 a year depending on qualifications. Many who are considering leaving IG Metall out of opposition or to save money do the sums: if the bonus is higher, they stay in the union—or rejoin. In effect, the corporations are paying the union's membership dues with the bonuses, because otherwise even more employees would turn their backs on IG Metall.

IG Metall, still the world's largest single trade union, has lost more than 660,000 members since 1990 and needs the remaining members to finance its enormous apparatus. IG Metall receives €600 million a year in membership dues, half of which flows into its apparatus. Because it has not organised any significant strikes, it now has an estimated fortune of €4-5 billion, fed by membership dues, property and financial market transactions, and not least by corporate contributions.

It is against this background that Brossardt's declaration of war on workers in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* interview and his hint to IG Metall that the companies could scrap the special bonuses for union members must be understood. The corporations rely on IG Metall and its apparatus, which have acted in the interests of shareholders and corporate owners in the past and will continue to do so in future.

Asked why workers should bleed for the auto industry's management errors, such as the diesel scandal, the missed shift to e-mobility, or the wrong models, Brossardt replied: "It would be arrogant to talk of management errors." After all, he said, "the trade unionists sit on all the supervisory boards; they could have tried to do things differently."

That is the heart of the problem confronting workers. IG Metall officials sit on all the supervisory boards and have co-signed the job cuts at VW, Mercedes, Bosch, ZF, Schaeffler and many other companies. They support the conversion of the civilian economy to war production, for example at VW in Osnabrück and Alstom in Görlitz, and call for protectionist measures in the interests of German and European corporations.

At the auto supplier Schaeffler, in the middle of the wage negotiations, IG Metall officials have now agreed to the elimination of a further 3,460 jobs in Europe, 2,660 of them in Germany. Including programmes decided earlier, Schaeffler is thus cutting around 18 percent of its German jobs. At the same time, wage cuts have been agreed for the remaining employees—a measure IG Metall euphemistically calls a "solidarity contribution," without which "the job cuts would have been even bigger."

From 2030, Schaeffler will save €300 million a year as a result, money that flows into the owners' coffers. For one thing is always taken for granted at every company, no matter how badly it is doing: executive pay and shareholder dividends take absolute priority over the wages and jobs of the workforce.

That is why Brossardt can act so brazenly. He knows that the union apparatus stands on the side of the corporations and is effectively in their hands because it is paid by them.

In the wage round, the union leadership is trying to keep the warning strikes to a minimum and to use them as a safety valve to channel and control workers' anger. IG Metall wants to "continue negotiating swiftly." The third round started on Thursday in the Baden-Württemberg bargaining region and continues on Friday in other districts. The aim is a quick "pilot agreement," which would then be transferred to all 15 bargaining regions.

Workers in the metal and electrical industries face a fundamental decision. The IG Metall leadership does not represent their interests. This apparatus is hostile to the workforces. It cannot be pressured "from within," "pushed to the left" or "reformed." Its officials are closely tied politically, financially and not infrequently personally to top management and shareholder representatives, and share the same profit-driven standpoint.

That is why independent rank-and-file action committees must be built, elected by the workers themselves, accountable to the workforce and free of full-time union officials and works council barons. These committees must turn the warning strikes into a real struggle—for full compensation for inflation, against every form of "differentiation," against job cuts and against longer working hours.

Metal and electrical workers have proved in the past that they are ready to fight. What they lack is a leadership that will not betray this struggle. All those who seriously want to defend their jobs and wages should therefore contact us. Fill out the form or send a message via WhatsApp to +491633378340.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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