

Germany: Union steps up pressure on Schlecker drug store workers

By Sven Heymann
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Following a declaration of bankruptcy and the summary dismissal of 11,000 staff, workers at the German drugs chain store Schlecker face further attacks from the Schlecker family, the bankruptcy administrator and the Verdi (Vereinte Dienstleistungsgewerkschaft—United Services Union) trade union. The latter is doing everything in its power to prevent workers from asserting their legitimate rights.

In the wake of the bankruptcy announcement at Schlecker, Verdi refused to mobilise staff, although it is highly likely that the union was informed at an early stage about management's strategy and plans. Instead the union limited its activities to futile appeals to German state governments to provide an alternative "transfer company" [which offers short term contracts to employees who have been laid off, theoretically to help them look for new jobs] for workers made redundant.

In the event, promises of a transfer company, which would have guaranteed sacked workers a percentage of their wages for a period of six months, were dashed last Thursday when the states of Bavaria, Lower Saxony and Saxony refused to provide funds for such a project.

Prior to this decision, Verdi officials had exerted considerable pressure on sacked workers to accept the move to a transfer company, which involves considerable advantages for the company. According to German industrial law, workers agreeing to move to a transfer company forfeit any claim to severance pay, as well as the possibility of legally challenging their dismissal.

The liquidator, Arndt Geiwitz, who recently collaborated with the German unions to dissolve Manroland, the printing press manufacturer, publicly stated his intention to encourage as many workers as

possible to shift into the transfer company. This would save Schlecker from a mountain of claims against dismissal which, Geiwitz argued, would in turn serve to discourage potential investors.

Now, following the collapse of the plans for a transfer company, Geiwitz and Verdi are placing additional pressure on workers, attempting to make sure they do not pursue lawsuits against the company. Last Thursday, the liquidator cynically sought to pit the sacked workers and remaining employees against each other. Of course, every worker had the right to sue, Geiwitz said, "but such actions are unlikely to be worthwhile, although a large number of claims would be highly damaging to the rest of the Schlecker workforce".

Leading Verdi negotiator Bernard Franke expressed the same opinion. "I do not see an awful lot of sense in dismissal complaints, especially in large numbers. If a few thousand seek to sue, the jobs have gone anyway, the stores have all been shut down", Franke told the *Rheinpfalz* newspaper.

The latest Verdi leaflet refers to a "bitter hour for the Schlecker women", following the collapse of plans for a transfer company and then continues: "Verdi will continue to assist the affected colleagues. We will advise and assist them along their difficult road".

This statement represents a new stage in the anti-labour policies of the union. Not only has the union refused to lift a finger to defend jobs, it is working directly to deprive sacked workers of their legal rights, i.e., a fair deal for employees who in many cases worked for the Schlecker family for decades.

The current state of negotiations, however, appears entirely favourable for the company owners. Prior to the bankruptcy proceedings, the official owner of the company, Anton Schlecker, handed over most of his

wealth to his wife and children, who are now lining up to take over what remains of the company. On Sunday *Der Spiegel* reported that Lars and Meike Schlecker are seeking to buy back the group with the help of a co-investor.

Should the takeover occur, it would mean that the Schlecker family will have been able to successfully shed half the company's workforce and create the basis for raking in extra millions in profits--all as the result of the closest collaboration with the Verdi.

The ruthless activities of the union and its works councils are underscored by an examination of the company's own website forum, schlecker-blog.com, in which employees exchange their views and experiences.

One of the moderators of the website explains that the company's redundancy plan had been drawn up collectively by "the joint works council [GBR], Verdi and the team of the insolvency administrator". The nature of the plan is revealed in subsequent blogs.

One contributor "Patricia", writes: "All the GBR did was to rescue its own ass. Nobody has played fair. My shop has not been closed, but after 16 years work, I, a single parent with 2 kids, am being forced out to make room for a GBR member. They [the union] have ripped us off just like the company itself. They have all played a dirty game despite their claims that they were fighting for US".

"Elfimaus" agrees: "Yes, I agree with you, it is unfortunate. Stores remains open, but their long time workers must go. The main thing is to ensure that the union bureaucrats and maybe their friends have a job, I do not know. I would really like to see the details of the redundancy plan".

The contributor "mustermann" is of the same opinion: "Our GBR in Lünen has put up a fight, but only for themselves", and "sternstunde" writes: "The works councils have also kept their jobs in Hanover. Those in power look after themselves first".

Additional contributions in the forum make clear that the company works councils have played a leading role in deciding which workers should be sacked. The result is a climate of uncertainty for those workers retaining their jobs. "Even those who still have work are not so sure. If there is a flood of legal actions, Schlecker will face huge legal costs", one saleswoman in Ludwigshafen told the WSWS. "In that case, it is

entirely possible that the costs will be passed onto us in the form of further redundancies and the closure of stores".

"Many have said they will not try to sue", a colleague from Mannheim reported. "Firstly, because they have had enough already and secondly, because such a procedure is very risky. Not everybody can afford to take legal action. And Schlecker has its own lawyers in case of such an eventuality".

It is already clear that the bankruptcy administrators and Verdi will not be content with the current dismissals and will carry out further attacks on the wages and working conditions of the remaining staff.

In its latest leaflet to its Schlecker members, Verdi announces that it has signed a number of contracts with the liquidators on social (redundancy) plans, safety proposals and an agreement on future works council structures. "The works council have unanimously agreed to the terms". the leaflet boasts. Schlecker workers should regard this announcement as a threat.

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