

Dortmund: Steelworkers protest against plant closure

By Philipp Frisch
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Fierce exchanges took place at a workplace meeting at the Hoesch sheet steel works (HSP) in Dortmund earlier this month, when HSP CEO Roger Schlim announced the closure of the plant.

“We feel betrayed and let down,” workers shouted. “The site is not economical,” Schlim declared, but then claimed, in the face of vociferous protests by workers, that the decision on closure “had not yet been made.” According to media reports, his remarks were repeatedly interrupted by heckling and protests from the outraged workers.

According to Schlim, HSP made a record loss of €97 million in 2014. He blamed the fall-off in orders on Europe-wide austerity measures that made the purchase of expensive raw materials increasingly difficult. The concern could no longer continue absorbing the losses, he added.

When asked by workers what was to happen next, Schlim answered that the company held 70,000-90,000 tons of raw material for processing “which we want to get rid of.”

The workers assembled at the packed plant meeting reacted angrily and demanded strike action. One worker was cited in the local press saying: “In my opinion, not a single ton should be allowed to leave the works as long as the closure decision is not retracted.”

The Dortmund Hoesch sheet steel plant (HSP) has a history going back over 100 years. The plant has been part of the Salzgitter AG concern since the late 1990s. In recent years, jobs have been constantly whittled away and the workforce now stands at 363. At the end of March this figure stood at just over 500. Another 1,000 to 1,500 ancillary jobs are dependent on the plant.

Workers are especially angry because only three months ago the executive, the works council and the IG

Metall union negotiated a deal involving the elimination of 163 jobs. A shift was axed, reducing production to two shifts. The works council and trade union defended the concessions as the only way to protect the remaining jobs.

A press statement from the works council and IG Metall, dated June 2, reads: “In March a forward-looking works council in Dortmund and the company works council in Salzgitter accepted and adopted drastic measures to preserve the Dortmund plant.” In reality the bureaucrats paved the way for the closure.

The works council reacted promptly when workers discussed the necessity of a strike after the workplace meeting. Works council chairman Klaus Frerichs spoke out against a strike and declared the next day: “We want to show the company. We are still here, we can do it, we are not giving up.” He expressed hope for an investor to take over HSP. Frerichs also pleaded for funding from the public sector to keep the plant going.

Since the closure announcement, IG Metall and the works council are keen to ensure that HSP remains functioning. HSP works council member Klaus Röhr said, “It had been expected, but we are still deeply shocked.” Röhr advised the workforce “to retain a glimmer of hope.” Hans-Jürgen Urban, who sits on the executive board of the IG Metall and receives considerable royalties for his post as deputy chief of the Salzgitter Supervisory Board, claimed the union would not accept closure. Then, in the same breath, he called for production to be continued at HSP until the end of the year.

The factory’s decline began almost 20 years ago. In 1996, the HSP subsidiary, Bergbaustahl, with 100 employees, was closed. Then in 1997, following the merger of Thyssen and Krupp-Hoesch Stahl AG, HSP

was separated from Krupp-Hoesch. At that time the workforce numbered 670.

Two years later, rumors circulated of plans to sell off HSP. After an eight-day strike, ThyssenKrupp sold the factory to the Salzgitter Group. Even that time the works council and IG Metall were closely involved in the management strategy of either selling the plant or closing it completely. These two alternatives were repeatedly raised by the Salzgitter management in order to pressure the workforce to make concessions.

As a result of the 2008 economic crisis and subsequent drastic austerity measures flexible work-time accounts and short-time working were introduced at the factory. The works council offered management significant concessions and urged workers to accept. At the time, the former works council chairman Gerd Pfisterer (of the Maoist MLPD) declared, “We are not prepared to support a deal that involves more than five days short-time working or a 10 percent decline in salaries.”

In March this year the works council then agreed to the dismissal of 163 employees, thereby giving management a green light for the closure of the plant.

The closure of HSP follows a familiar pattern. There are many parallels to the winding down and closure of the GM-Opel plant in nearby Bochum, particularly regarding the role of the works council and IG Metall. In Bochum, the works council also argued against any militant measures by workers to prevent closure. In 2013 Opel works council chairman Rainer Eienkel appeared on a platform in Bochum with leaders of the Left Party and fiercely opposed workers’ demands for an indefinite strike, declaring, “This is absolute nonsense, complete nonsense.”

Instead, the works council and IG Metall agreed to ever more concessions, arguing, just like the bureaucrats at HSP in Dortmund, that this was the only way to prevent the closure of the GM-Opel plant. The same vague promises were made and the same worthless slogan propagated: “We fight to the end, but also work to the very end.”

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