

# 160,000 industrial workers strike in Germany

By Peter Schwarz  
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Around 160,000 employees in the automotive, steel and electronics industries have engaged in partial strikes called by the IG Metall union, which is currently negotiating a new wage contract for 3.9 million workers in Germany's largest industrial sector. The actions include workers at VW, Porsche, Daimler, Bosch and other auto, auto parts and metal industries such as steel giant ThyssenKrupp.

The union says the job actions will be expanded in coming days and IG Metall leader Jörg Hofman has threatened to call one-day strikes or hold a vote on an open-ended strike if the employers' association for the metal industry does not make concessions by the end of January. This would be the first full strike called by IG Metall in the sector since 2003, when it called off an unsuccessful four-week strike to expand the 35-hour work week into eastern Germany.

With widespread anger over social inequality and the wave of job-cutting by Siemens and other profitable corporations there is a growing determination among workers to fight for significant improvements in wages and working conditions. IG Metall, however, is attempting to bring the bargaining to as quick a conclusion as possible. The metal and electronics sector is key for German exports and IG Metall is determined to prevent anything from disrupting its longstanding corporatist partnership with the companies.

In addition, the unions support the establishment of a new grand coalition government of Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) parties and the union-backed Social Democratic Party (SPD). IG Metall executives want to prevent the outbreak of any major struggles, which could imperil the ongoing secret talks over the formation of a right-wing government committed to austerity and rearmament.

The leader of the German Trade Union Association (DGB), Rainer Hoffmann, explicitly called last weekend for a new grand coalition, which would offer "a good perspective for Germany and Europe."

Pointing to the high profits and record anticipated contracts for the metal and electronics industry, IG Metall head Hofman said he expected the employers' association to reach a rapid agreement. "A brief and strong struggle would perhaps be better for both sides," he said. "We want to achieve our demands and ensure the production stoppages are manageable for the employers," Hofman added.

There is an enormous chasm, however, between the maneuvering of the union apparatus and the aspirations of millions of industrial workers who are dissatisfied, angry and ready to fight.

For years, workers have witnessed how profits, wages for managers and the wealth of the super-rich exploded, while their income has stagnated or declined. Increasing rent prices and healthcare costs, which are hardly noted in the official inflation rate, pose an existential threat for many.

Dividend payouts to shareholders increased in the metal and electronics industry by 11 percent per share in 2014, 9 percent in 2015 and 12 percent in 2016, while nominal wages rose by between 2 and 3 percent annually, resulting essentially in a real wage freeze. Of the €43.5 billion (US\$52 billion) in pre-tax profit made by the industry in 2015, companies paid out €10.8 billion (US\$12.9 billion), or 24.8 percent, to shareholders. In 2016, the figure rose to 28 percent.

Despite the much vaunted 35-hour workweek, almost 20 percent of all metalworkers already work longer hours. According to the union's own figures of the 680,000 workers in the sector, 57.3 percent of workers work overtime, almost half work Saturdays, one quarter work Sundays, and one third work split shifts. In addition, hundreds of thousands of temporary contract workers labour in the factories and portions of production have been outsourced to Eastern Europe, where wages range from one third to one tenth of what is paid in Germany.

Hostile to any struggle to unite autoworkers in western and the eastern Europe, IG Metall has joined the employers in using threats of expanding production in the east to undermine the wages and working conditions of German workers.

The unions and the SPD bear chief responsibility for these conditions. The Hartz laws, adopted by the last SPD-led federal government in 2003, laid the basis for the huge expansion of temporary work and low-paid jobs. IG Metall and their works councils have participated in the drafting of the downsizing measures in the plants and imposed them over the stiff resistance of rank-and-file workers.

As a result, the SPD achieved its worst result in the September 2017 federal election. The party long ago lost its mass support among workers. Most workers also view IG Metall with distrust, if not outright opposition. The rallies accompanying the "warning strikes," which usually last an

hour and have no economic impact, are mostly dominated by union bureaucrats.

A 62-year-old worker at Siemens' dynamo plant in Berlin spoke for many when he told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "We really should be here in greater numbers. If we want to defend jobs and enforce our contract demands, we should be calling for a general strike. That would be just right, a general strike."

Well aware of this sentiment, IG Metall executives are tailoring their demands to maintain control over workers while they prepare another sellout.

On the one hand, IG Metall is demanding a six percent wage increase for one year. While the union has presented this as a substantial wage demand, it would not even come close to covering real needs. Moreover, IG Metall routinely reaches a deal well below the original demand and "stretches out" the pay raise by extending the contract beyond one year. In 2016, IG Metall demanded a five percent pay raise and settled for a two-step 4.8 percent hike spread out over 20 months.

The daily *Tagesspiegel* assumes that IG Metall will get the 6 percent "in stages...which is not a problem with a long contract duration of 20 months or more." Since IG Metall leader Hofman wants to avoid another contract fight ahead of the trade union conference in October 2019, the web site said, the contract will "run into late autumn of next year." It is therefore likely that the wage increase will fall well below the 3.5 percent which the pro-corporate Ifo Institute estimated would be the average wage increase across Germany this year.

IG Metall's second demand, under the slogan "my life—my time," is that every worker be allowed to reduce their work week from 35 hours to 28 hours for up to two years, with a corresponding reduction in pay. Only split shift workers, parents with children under the age of 14, or workers who care for relatives will receive modest wage compensation for the reduced hours they work.

This demand finds support mainly among younger workers, for the obvious reason that it is impossible to start a family or care for relatives with the stress of working a full-time job. According to an IG Metall poll, 82 percent of respondents would like to work shorter hours temporarily, while 89 percent would like to adjust their hours of work at short notice to meet their needs.

But this is also a trap. The corporations are resisting the demand by arguing for their own purposes that workers currently working part-time would be treated unfairly. Industry observers expect employers to reach a deal with IG Metall if the union agrees to abandon the 35-hour work week and accept more flexibility for longer working hours. "The employers will agree to the claim for part-time work as well as the right to return to full-time—so long as the overall labour volume is not reduced," commented *Tagesspiegel*.

"Concretely, this means a further distancing from the 35-hour work week once so famously fought for. It has been the case

thus far that up to 18 percent of metal workers can work longer than the contractual 35-hour work week. This quota could disappear and an agreement reached on a corridor from 28 hours to 40 hours."

If workers are to fight for their justified demands, they must take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of IG Metall. New organizations of struggle, rank-and-file action committees, controlled by workers themselves, must be built to fight for the broadest mobilisation of the working class in Germany, across Europe and internationally.

The struggle in Germany is part of the growing resistance of the working class around the world. In France, opposition is mounting to the Macron government's labour laws. Over the past year, Fiat workers in Serbia and VW workers in Slovakia went on strike against starvation wages and conditions of slave labour. Autoworkers in China and India have also conducted bitter struggles, while autoworkers in North America rebelled in 2015 against the corrupt United Auto Workers. In December, Ford workers in Romania conducted a wildcat strike in opposition to the company-controlled union.

The nationalist and pro-capitalist perspective of the unions has brought workers to a dead end. The defence of wages, jobs and social achievements requires an international perspective to unite the working class around the world in a common struggle to defend the right to a good-paying and secure job, to high quality health care and decent housing, and the right to leisure time and access to culture for all workers.

The defence of the workers' hard-won gains requires a socialist perspective. Capitalist governments around the world, led by the Trump administration in the US, are preparing for new wars and attacks on the working class. In Berlin, a political conspiracy is taking place behind the backs of the population to install the most right-wing government since the downfall of the Third Reich. The program being discussed by the conservative parties and SPD is so anti-worker that they have agreed to maintain strict secrecy on the talks.

The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (SGP) calls for new elections. A clique of right-wing conspirators cannot be permitted to unilaterally impose their will on the population. The SGP is building a socialist alternative to capitalism, war and the strengthening of the repressive state apparatus. The social rights of the workers, who produce society's wealth, must be prioritised over the amassing of grotesque levels of wealth by the corporate bosses and financial oligarchy.

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