

German industrial workers continue strikes

By Ulrich Rippert
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Strikes by workers in Germany's automotive, steel and electronics industries were expanded on Thursday and Friday. Since the beginning of the week, 340,000 employees have participated in short walkouts, protest rallies and demonstrations.

Anger over social inequality and threatened layoffs, such as at Siemens, and many other companies is on the rise, and at the strike rallies it is pervasive and plain to see.

The IG Metall trade union is increasingly concerned about the unrest in the plants. While their officials deliver radical sounding speeches at strike rallies and accuse the companies of greed for profits and inhumane behavior, the union is already indicating its willingness to cooperate with management and is preparing a sell-out.

At the latest round of bargaining in the state of Baden-Württemberg on Thursday, the IG Metall delegation signaled its readiness to compromise on the issue of working hours. The head of the employers' group Sudwest Metall, Stefan Wolf, evaluated IG Metall's actions after the talks in Böblingen, commenting, "At least the trade union signaled a readiness for the first time to talk about the issue of volume on the question of working time."

The financial daily *Handelsblatt* made clear what this meant. "This suggests that the flexibilisation of working time demanded by IG Metall will go in both directions." This would mean that the trade union demand for workers to have the right to reduce working hours to 28 hours per week for a period of two years with a partial offsetting of wages would be transformed into its opposite.

While many workers would like to secure a temporary reduction in the workweek due to the increased speed-up, IG Metall is indicating its willingness to abandon the 35-hour workweek and agree to flexibility of working hours to 40 or more.

To date, quotas of 13 percent and 18 percent have been in place to regulate the number of workers who can work up to 40 hours per week. IG Metall has now signaled it will consent to relaxing the regulation, according to *Handelsblatt*. "The employers are still miles away from our ideas on the issue of working time", said IG Metall's Baden-Württemberg leader, Roman Zitzelsberger, "However, in today's negotiations, especially on the issue of time sovereignty, movement in the direction of the workers was visible, and this can be constructively worked on", the newspaper wrote.

On the radio station *Deutschlandfunk*, IG Metall leader Hofmann made clear his attitude when he called for a "restrained presence" and expressed the hope that the talks could be brought to a good result for all sides "without any further escalation."

Under no circumstances do the trade unions want to allow the strikes and protests to escape the narrow confines of the collective bargaining framework and be transformed into a broad mobilisation against mass layoffs, which have already been announced and initiated by many companies.

The IG Metall leadership is not only concerned with the interests of Germany's exporters, with whom they have developed a close partnership. Their main focus is instead the government crisis and the preparations for a new installment of the grand coalition. IG Metall leader Hofmann and other officials are Social Democratic Party (SPD) members and support the formation of a coalition between Germany's conservative parties and the SPD. They want to prevent the formation of the new government from taking place under conditions of a mass strike.

The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (SGP) firmly rejects such reactionary politics and advances the diametrically opposed standpoint. The SGP calls for the current warning strikes to be expanded and to be

made the prelude to a broad political mobilisation against the conspiracy taking place in Berlin. The political parties have been negotiating for months behind the backs of the population to form a government that will carry out a sharp shift to the right in foreign and domestic policy.

IG Metall considers its main task to be maintaining control of the emerging radicalisation throughout industry and to suppress it. The union is closely tied to the SPD, whose Hartz laws and Agenda 2010 dramatically intensified levels of exploitation and contributed to the miserable working conditions in the factories against which the strikes are directed. It is impossible to achieve serious wage demands and improvements in working hours while at the same time supporting a party responsible for attacks on wages and social services, and calling for a military build-up and attacks on democratic rights.

The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei therefore calls on workers in the metal and electronics industries to take control of the struggle into their own hands. New organisations of struggle, the building of action committees controlled by rank-and-file workers, are necessary for this. These committees must fight for the broadest possible mobilisation of workers throughout Germany, Europe and internationally.

The defence of wages, jobs and social achievements requires an international perspective. In their war against the working class, the transnational corporations and banks pursue an international strategy. The working class must therefore develop an international strategy for the class struggle to defend its interests. The action committees must establish connections with workers throughout Germany, Europe and globally so as to support each other's struggles.

The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei is ready to support any serious initiative to expand the strikes and develop them internationally.

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