

Germany: IG Metall seeks to impose new contract

By Gustav Kemper
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At the start of this week, thousands of industrial workers took part in limited “warning strikes” organised by the IG Metall trade union. While workers are keen to broaden and extend the strikes, the union is striving to reach a speedy agreement with management on the terms of a new contract.

Above all, IG Metall wants to ensure that the negotiations currently taking place between the conservative Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union and the Social Democratic Party on forming a new federal government take place without pressure from striking metalworkers.

Reuters reported that IG Metall and the employers' organisation, Südwestmetall, aim to end the wage dispute with a "negotiation marathon" on Wednesday.

More than 620,000 employees have been involved in short warning strikes since the beginning of the year as part of IG Metall's campaign for a 6 percent wage increase and the introduction of a temporary reduction in weekly working hours.

On Monday, more than 20,000 workers from many factories participated in strike action. Among the companies affected were major corporations such as Siemens, Daimler and BMW. Also affected were Procter & Gamble, Hilite and Warema in Marktheidenfeld, Düker in Laufach, automotive plants and WA production in Waldaschaff, Schaeffler and other companies in Wuppertal, Bosch in Bamberg, the Engine Plant in Chemnitz, the Daimler engine plant MDC Power in Kölleda/Thuringia, Bombardier Transportation in Hennigsdorf, plus a number of other concerns.

As in previous labour disputes, the contract bargaining in the state of Baden-Württemberg is regarded as a template for a deal for the entire country. An agreement is expected on Wednesday. According to

Reuters, union reps and management have met since mid-January, “with representatives from both sides struggling to make compromises almost every day.”

Details of any deal have not yet been announced. Instead, IG Metall speakers at rallies have repeated the union's usual slogans and complaints about the unreasonable stance taken by the national employers' association, Gesamtmetall. Stefanie Jahn, from IG Metall in Oranienburg and Potsdam, criticised employers for failing “to respond to the demand for the equalisation of working hours between East and West.” How loudly, she asked, “do we have to announce that?” In general, she complained lamely, the “creativity of employers in the first three rounds of negotiations” left much to be desired.

On Monday, Anne Borchelt, IG Metall's political secretary for the same region, told striking workers at Bombardier Transportation in Hennigsdorf that the employers' side offered only “a can of beer” in wage bargaining last Friday. In contrast, the union was working “with intensive pressure” in Baden-Wuerttemberg to reach a solution.

Many workers fear that the union's call for a voluntary reduction in working hours from 35 to 28 hours per week (limited to a two-year period) will be used by the employers to increase the average work week to 42 hours.

The head of the Südwestmetall employer's federation told Reuters he saw a chance for employers to “reach a significant share” of their goals in terms of longer working hours. So far, employees can work more than 35 hours a week only in a few districts.

At the start of the year, IG Metall announced its intention to achieve a quick negotiation result, possibly in January. IG Metall's determination to achieve a rapid agreement and end the current strike movement

was underlined by a quote from the head of the union, Jörg Hofmann, in Deutschlandfunk.

Hoffman said he wished for “moderation” in the coming talks and said a good result for both sides could be achieved “without further escalation.”

Thousands of jobs are currently under threat at companies such as Siemens, Bombardier and Thyssenkrupp, but the union has excluded the issue of jobs from the contract bargaining process. The IG Metall leadership is opposed to a broad mobilisation of workers against job cuts. The majority of trade union leaders are also Social Democratic Party (SDP) functionaries and support the formation of a grand coalition.

The union’s complaints about miserable working conditions and low wages are entirely hypocritical. The union is in the pocket of the party that has headed the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour for the past few years and it supports the formation of a new government that will impose even more drastic attacks on past social gains.

For their part, many workers want to extend the strikes to encompass the entire country in order to defend jobs and end the nerve-racking insecurity of temporary contract employment.

Robert, a contract worker at Bombardier Transportation in Hennigsdorf, spoke on behalf of many of his colleagues when he told the *World Socialist Web Site*: “I have been working as a temporary worker at Bombardier since last October. We face quite different problems here than a reduction in working time. We will never be made full-time and that’s sad. As contract workers we earn about 400 euros less than the core workforce for doing the same work, sometimes even more work, because as a temporary worker you have an insecure job and are under pressure to work harder. One feels like a third-class person.”

New temporary workers arrive every week. He had the impression that almost half of the workforce in his department were temporary workers. “It’s easier for the company to get rid of contract workers when orders decrease. The core workforce are paid severance money, but we are not paid,” he added.

The most important issue was to secure jobs. “If people here were asked by the union what they want, I think 90 percent would reply a secure job. Especially

those over 50 years old. They still want to work until they retire.”

Regarding the tactics of IG Metall and the holding of short warning strikes, he said: “The warning strike was organised to benefit employers. They are carried out at the end of a shift, when there is hardly any interruption to production. It is not really a means to exert pressure.”

Colleagues of Robert, who are also employed as temporary workers, said: “It would be good if we were to strike all over the country, including against foreign companies. But there is no all-European union. In fact, there should be something like that.”

There were also critical comments from the full-time workforce regarding the union. A young skilled worker said, “The open letter the union sent to the government did not help. There may have been a meeting between the Bombardier board and Economics Minister Sigmar Gabriel, but that did not help. I think little of politicians anyway. They make sure we pay our taxes, and then we are robbed of any influence. So much for equality.”

The union and the SPD are doing their utmost to keep the growing radicalisation in factories under control. Although the corporations are transnationally organised, labour disputes are reduced to mini-strikes limited to individual regions or plants.

That is why the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party--SGP) is calling on workers to unite in forming action committees, organised independently of the trade unions, to establish contact with other factories and organise a joint struggle. Workers must also develop an international strategy of class struggle to defend their interests. The action committees must establish contact with workers throughout Germany, Europe and around the world to support each other.

The SGP is ready to support any serious initiative to expand and internationalise strikes.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>