

IG Metall union shuts down strike by hundreds of thousands in Germany

By Christoph Vandreier
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The IG Metall union moved on Tuesday to shut down strike action by hundreds of thousands of metallurgical, automotive and electrical workers across Germany, ahead of the planned formation of a new grand coalition (CDU/SPD) government this week.

After more than a decade of wage and benefit cuts, with German corporations awash in profits, the union has agreed to a contract that will reduce workers' wages in real terms and ban further strikes for over two years.

The deal makes clear that the union never had any intention to improve workers' wages and conditions. Rather, it sought to prevent pent-up anger over falling wages from leading to a nationwide strike movement that might endanger the formation of another coalition government between the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Social Democratic Party (SPD).

Despite broad opposition to the imposition of another round of wage-cutting, workers will not be allowed to even vote on the new contract, which will be effectively imposed by decree.

And despite plans by Siemens, General Electric, Opel and Bombardier to implement mass layoffs, workers will be prevented from striking for the 27-month duration of the contract.

The union is seeking to tie workers' hands in the face of the next round of social austerity, which the grand coalition is preparing in order to finance its plans for military rearmament and further enrich the banks and corporations.

The contract provides for a wage increase of just 4.3 percent, spread over more than two years, meaning that workers' wages will barely keep up with the rate of inflation, which is expected to increase over the coming period. This will mean an effective pay cut. To offset this wage reduction, the union has agreed to a set of

miserly cash payments, which the corporations can renege on if they cite "economic hardship."

The final deal is even worse than the offer the employers made last month. At the time, the employers had offered 6.8 percent over a 27-month term, or 3 percent a year, compared to the 6 percent annual wage increase that the union had officially demanded.

IG Metall has even transformed its original demand for a voluntary reduction of working hours with a partial wage compensation into its opposite. Although workers can reduce their weekly working time to 28 hours for up to two years, they will not receive any wage compensation.

In addition, the companies can permit up to half of their workforce to exceed the standard 35-hour workweek if they claim a "shortage of skilled workers."

Years of wage-cutting and the gutting of workplace protections have already swelled the profits of German corporations and made Germany the most unequal large country in Europe.

The incoming grand coalition government will not only continue this assault on workers' wages and benefits, but set a precedent for wage-cutting throughout Europe.

At the same time, the new government will seek to turn the European Union (EU) from an economic into a military alliance, through a massive rearmament program aimed at making the EU a "world power" able to wage wars throughout the world.

By seeking to impose this concessions contract onto workers, the German trade unions have shown themselves to be key accomplices of this reactionary and anti-working-class program, doing their part to make sure social resources continue to be diverted from the working class to the war machine and the stock

exchange.

Shortly before the announcement of the contract, Reiner Hoffmann, chair of the German Trade Union Confederation (DGB), reiterated the unions' support for a new edition of the grand coalition in an interview with the Funke media group. "Only the SPD can ensure a stable government," he declared. "It must face up to the responsibility."

Hoffmann also praised the "achievements" of the last grand coalition government "over the past four years," which slashed workers' wages not only in Germany, but also throughout Europe through the imposition of draconian EU austerity measures.

Despite the disastrous results in last year's election for the CDU and SPD, which collectively lost 14 percent of their vote total, Hoffman vociferously opposed the calling of new elections, because "the SPD could lose even more" votes, making the formation of a grand coalition even more difficult.

The same authoritarian outlook is expressed in the contract being imposed on German workers, in which the unions, working together with the government and corporations, are seeking to impose concessions in the face of mass opposition and militancy.

There is no way for workers to defend their wages and working conditions outside of a break with the trade unions and the formation of rank-and-file committees. This fight is inseparable from the call by the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party) for new elections, in which workers must mobilize behind a socialist program that combines the fight against austerity, dictatorship and war with the overthrow of capitalism.

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