

Daimler-Benz workers in Germany support GM strikers

By Gregor Link and K. Nesan
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The strike by 48,000 workers at General Motors in the US has won considerable support from autoworkers in the city of Stuttgart. Among German workers the US strike, carried out despite the opposition of the United Auto Workers union, is considered to be a courageous act and a model for upcoming struggles in Germany.

Last week, supporters of the *World Socialist Web Site* distributed copies of the article “US autoworkers paralyze General Motors” during the shift change at the Mercedes-Benz plant in Mettingen, Stuttgart. They discussed the international significance of the strike with workers at the plant.

Stuttgart is the second largest city in southern Germany and one of the centers of the European auto industry. In addition to the factories owned by the Porsche concern and large supplier companies, the city is also the headquarters of Daimler Automotive.

The Mettingen plant processes metal parts for Daimler’s main production site in Untertürkheim. In a production facility stretching over more than two million square meters, 19,000 workers produce engines, axles, transmissions and other components for the auto industry. In total, just fewer than 300,000 people work at 16 production sites around the world for the Daimler Group, generating sales of over 167 billion euros (US \$184 billion) in 2018.

Orkan, a young Daimler worker from the Mettingen plant, reacted with enthusiasm to the strike by the American GM workers. “Amazing, almost 50,000 workers—you hear nothing about it here in Germany. They must be really nervous! If there are ways to support the striking US colleagues, we definitely have to!”

His standpoint was shared by his colleague Ibo, who added, “It’s obvious why people are not hearing about the GM strike here—they’re not interested in

publicizing it! In there,” he said pointing to the factory—“so much is kept secret, believe me. Last year they began firing people, and this year too. They also want to get rid of me and things will only get worse with the conversion to electrical mobility.”

Orkan said the conversion of production to electric vehicles will have far-reaching effects for Germany and Europe, including on political developments. “I do not believe that the companies or government are concerned about protecting the environment. Climate problems are huge, but this is all about money and power. Just like the arms trade in the Middle East. Friends of mine were in Dubai and they informed me about the maneuvering and secret deals carried out there.”

Ibo’s colleague Süleyman stressed that the links between money and power were not restricted to the Middle East or the US but were especially close in Germany: “There is a great deal of corruption in my country—but there is here as well. In Turkey, Erdogan has everything under his control, but here, it’s the industries which control everything.”

“Who do you think Merkel obeys?” Süleyman asked ironically and pointed upwards, towards the floors of the factory management. “It’s not the chancellor who says what’s what. Instead she is told what the people at Daimler want. She simply does what the shareholders want. That’s not much better than it is back in Turkey, believe me, we know about these things.”

Another worker, Thomas, shared the same opinion. “The corporations have the power in this country—no one else. Once the switch to electro mobility comes, they will try to lay off a lot of people. That is already on the cards. It is assumed that only a third of the workforce will be needed.”

The discussions with Daimler workers made clear

that the US strike at General Motors is seen as a landmark. “What the people at GM did is really very brave. It should be done here!” Thomas said. He added that the corruption scandal at the UAW came as no real surprise. “The unions no longer have the power they had before. In fact they do nothing for workers. That’s why nobody wants to become a member anymore.”

He described how the IG Metall union is dividing workers. “When it comes down to it, the issue between temporary workers and permanent employees is that those who are a member of the union remain, those who are not must go. This creates a lot of pressure in the workplace.”

Another worker, Joachim, said, “There is a system behind the corruption in the unions. It’s not about individuals; it’s about conflicts of interest, about so-called ‘practical constraints’. The result is a real clique. I experienced it myself; I was a member of IG Metall for a long time but not anymore.

“Climbing the ladder, increased salary and union policies are closely related but at some point it was just too much for me. And then when one or the other of them tries to show a bit of backbone, it is just not credible and leaves an unpleasant taste in the mouth. At some point all the wrangling about salaries and posts was too much for me and I quit.”

A worker who wanted to remain anonymous showed no interest in the conversation until the WSWS reporters made clear they were opposed to IG Metall. That the unions are on the side of the management “is well known,” he said. He would rather not express his opinion of IG Metall. “I have two kids, you know, I have to watch what I say. But you can believe me, I know what the Americans are going through.”

Another colleague, Klaus, responded to the statement that the trade unions are on the side of the corporate executives. “That is exactly right—this is pretty obvious now. With [IG Metall] you cannot achieve anything. Most people in the industry who give the question some thought know it too. But there are only a few of us and we are isolated. The question is, what is the next step?”

Klaus reacted very thoughtfully and with interest when the WSWS supporters explained the need for workers to organize rank-and-file factory committees, independent of the union, to unite workers in Germany, the US and around the world against the global auto

companies.

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