

Siemens workers resist planned job cuts in Germany

By Gustav Kemper
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The IG Metall trade union is trying to keep control over growing resistance among Siemens workers against the spin-off of the group's Gas & Power energy division by organising small scale protests in Nuremberg and Berlin, thereby preventing a joint struggle of all the sites affected.

In June last year, the union approved Siemens CEO Joe Kaeser's "Vision 2020+" programme, which proposed to spin off the company's energy business as a separate entity under the name Gas & Power. An extraordinary shareholders general meeting in June 2020 will finalise the Gas & Power IPO.

Kaeser's strategy is to transform Siemens into a holding company in which the various divisions are listed as independent companies. As a result, weaker divisions would no longer tarnish the corporation's balance sheet. The profits of a stronger division, such as those already listed under the Healthineers medical sector, will then no longer be able to compensate for the possible losses of another.

In order to maximize the initial share price, the Siemens board is planning massive job cuts and cost savings. The conditions under which the spin-off will take place were negotiated on Monday and Tuesday in Munich between the company board and IG Metall representatives on the Works Council. In Germany alone, 1,400 jobs will go, of which about 500 are based in Berlin. At the same time, there will be speed ups and the level of exploitation significantly raised.

Instead of mobilizing the entire workforce against job losses, IG Metall has only organized small scale protests.

Last week, IG Metall had several hundred workers from the Siemens switch gear plant in Berlin-Spandau march to Jakob-Kaiser-Platz, a roundabout far away from any houses or shops. Only loyal works council

members and politicians were allowed to trot out their tired phrases and meaningless statements of "solidarity." Every critical voice on the part of the workers was suppressed, and even elected works council representatives were prohibited from speaking.

Regina Katerndahl, IG Metall Berlin deputy leader, invoked the "Radolfzell II" agreement, which had been negotiated between the board and the union in 2010. "We have to push that through," she shouted out to the participants in the demonstration.

This agreement, which supposedly provided protection against dismissals, is not worth the paper on which it is written. In fact, the union leaders agreed to a clause in the agreement expressly stipulating that under certain conditions, "such a guarantee cannot be given."

Several Siemens workers who participated in the protest talked to reporters from the WSWS and expressed their discontent. "Really, the union should have opposed the spin-off of the energy sector, which is driving forward workforce shrinkage and layoffs," one mechanic said.

Another explained, "The spin-off was sold to us as if it would work out great, everything would be alright. Of course, we have no confidence in that, but we also do not have the opportunity to intervene in any major way, except in the demo." The ultimate result of the spin-off would only be seen in three years, when the new company started and the protections against dismissal had expired, he said. In addition, it was completely unclear what will become of the plans for the new Siemens research campus, "Project Siemensstadt 2.0," and what consequences that would have.

Karl, another participant in the demo, underlined why he had little faith in the union leadership. "The cardinal error was already made by the union when it agreed to

divest the energy sector. That was precisely organized, it does not just happen with the wave of a hand, there must have been talks long before, and the works council just agreed.”

His colleague interjected saying that in face of globalization, it was necessary to organize international support. This led to a discussion about the fact that the IG Metall was not even calling for workers at all Siemens German locations to join forces, not to mention an international mobilization.

It became clear that the conflict between the IG Metall, whose officials sit on the Siemens supervisory board and work closely with management, and the workers, who are looking for a way to defend their jobs, is getting sharper.

When a works council representative wanted to speak critically at the rally, he was sharply attacked by the IG Metall bureaucrats. “This is not your event,” IG Metall functionary Katerndahl shouted out excitedly and ordered the works council representative to leave the stage immediately.

Instead, the switch gear factory’s works council representative Rüdiger Gross, Spandau’s mayor Helmut Kleebank (Social Democratic Party, SPD) spoke, along with other works council leaders and the Left Party’s federal parliamentary group development spokeswoman Helin Evrim Sommer, Dynamowerk works council chair Predrag Savic, and Berlin Siemens works council chair, Günter Augustat.

One empty phrase followed the last. Katerndahl employed the slogan “people before [profit] margins.” Evrim Somer appealed to CEO Joe Kaeser to follow his own slogans of corporate social responsibility with action.

Günter Augustat, chairman of the works council of the gas turbine factory, blatantly threatened the workers, declaring that they should not expect exaggerated results from the negotiations. “But you also have to deal with alternatives. At the Huttenstrasse [Siemens gas turbine factory] we have been through the fifth, sixth restructuring round. We have had to agree one round of cuts after another. But we have been able to work with alternatives and counter-concepts. We have succeeded in not having to give up all the value flows, we have been able to obtain many value flows and have been able to attract additional investments into our factories.”

So that is what the union is about, preserving the value flows of “their” business. Workers should bow to this and accept the corresponding job cuts. Augustat called on the workers to think about what could be improved in the manufacturing process.

The Dynamowerk works council representative urged workers to remain in the union, because that was one of the factors that had “led to success” at the Dynamowerk. It had been possible to prevent the closure of the plant by agreeing to job losses.

Those speaking at the rally made clear that a principled struggle to defend all jobs is only possible in opposition to IG Metall and its close collaboration with management.

WSWS reporters distributed a leaflet at the demonstration and informed those present about the strike of 48,000 General Motors’ auto workers in America, which had started days earlier.

The leaflet states, “The GM walkout is the latest stage in a global strike wave. The strike by US autoworkers is unfolding in the context of an international movement of the working class. Just last week, 8,000 GM workers went on strike in Korea, and French transit workers shut down the subways of Paris. Over the past year, auto workers in India and Mexico have waged powerful strikes. In France, Puerto Rico and Hong Kong, workers and youth have been involved in mass demonstrations in defense of their social and democratic rights. The struggle can succeed only if it is taken out of the control of the UAW traitors. Workers must elect rank-and-file committees to organize and expand the strike.”

Siemens workers must understand that their struggle to defend jobs is part of this international mobilization and build rank and file action committees linking up with workers at all other company locations in Germany and around the world to organize joint resistance.

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