

Coronavirus crisis in Germany: Workers must demand factories and large enterprises be closed

By Dietmar Gaisenkersting
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Germany has now banned events with more than 50 people. However, in large companies, where thousands of people are assembled every day, things are carrying on as usual. The shareholders' profits are of more value than workers' lives to the managers, the government and also the union officials.

Workers must therefore organise themselves independently and fight for the immediate closure of all nonessential factories and large enterprises in order to protect workers' lives and prevent the further spread of the coronavirus.

Reports of positive coronavirus tests of those working in large factories have been growing since the beginning of the month.

On Monday of last week, car manufacturer BMW reported the first person infected with coronavirus at its Dingolfingen plant. A short time later, another worker tested positive. The man is presently in domestic quarantine, the press office told the *Passauer Neue Presse*. Colleagues who work directly with the man are also not at work at the moment. BMW spokesman Bernd Eckstein gave assurances that production would continue "without restriction."

BMW employees are discussing the developments intensively on social media. Like everywhere else, management is weighing up the situation and is supported by the IG Metall union and its works council representatives. According to a post from a former oppositional works council member, the first case of coronavirus was "played down by the works council leadership," which said, "It's an Iranian temporary worker from FIZ [Research and Innovation Centre], you shouldn't shake hands, it's not so bad."

Three employees at Volkswagen had fallen ill with the coronavirus by the weekend. One worker at the Baunatal plant near Kassel tested positive after a private trip, the company announced. He had now been sent home as a precaution, as had five colleagues who had been in contact with him.

At the main VW plant in Wolfsburg, two employees are infected. They also developed symptoms after returning from trips and tested positive but are said not to have had any contact with the plant or colleagues before falling ill.

On Friday, the coronavirus also hit the Rüsselsheim car

manufacturer Opel, where an employee in the administration tested positive. He is also in quarantine at home, as are close colleagues. Meanwhile, Opel has told almost all employees in its administrative headquarters Adam-Opel-Haus to work from home for at least the next two weeks. Production is not affected, a spokesman for Opel said. In Rüsselsheim—and also in the other plants of the PSA group—production is currently continuing as normal, the Opel spokesman said.

There is an officially confirmed coronavirus case at Ford in Cologne. The affected employee works in product development in the Merkenich district. He had stayed in self quarantine at home since the beginning of March, waiting for the ultimately positive test result. Ford has urged around 30 colleagues of the patient to stay at home.

Last week, the WSWS was informed that company management had not allowed two workers to stay at home due to suspected coronavirus. The two had been at a carnival in Gangelt in the Heinsberg district, considered a hotspot of the outbreak in North Rhine-Westphalia. Although they had contacted the personnel department, they were told to come to work and say nothing, to avoid "panic." This fact could not be verified.

However, many Ford workers do not consider this account far-fetched. One told the WSWS, "Nobody is telling us anything, everything is being covered up so that production continues and there is no panic." He reported that Ford wanted to stop production for two weeks over Easter instead of one week as planned.

The coronavirus crisis has already had a far greater impact at the Mercedes-Benz plant in Rastatt, where a total of 6,500 people are employed producing compact cars such as the A- and B-Class. On Tuesday evening last week, workers on the late shift tested positive for the virus. While the company's press office did not say how many are affected, it assured the public that "Our operations are continuing unrestricted."

One day later, on Wednesday, the Higher Federal Authority for Infectious Diseases classified the nearby French region of Grand Est, which includes the whole of Alsace, as a coronavirus risk area. The authority thus followed the

recommendation of the Robert Koch Institute (RKI). In the regions designated as risk areas, all inhabitants must expect drastic restrictions on their freedom of movement. They are not allowed to work. But apparently Daimler called workers living in the nearby border area into work at the Rastatt plant on Wednesday and even on Thursday.

The *Badische Neueste Nachrichten* (BNN) received an anonymous email on Wednesday morning, saying that the management was ignoring the RKI's warning. "There are about 600 employees in production and another 100 in administration from the above-mentioned regions still working at the plant without restrictions," the informant told the regional newspaper.

Posts on regional Facebook groups have also suggested this. A screenshot, which is said to be taken from the Daimler intranet, says that employees from the Grand Est region should come to work, BNN reported. "The border will not be closed, and those from Alsace will work normally at the Mercedes plant in Rastatt! 12.03.2020 Early shift," a user posted on Facebook Thursday morning.

The company only reacted on Thursday evening. "If possible, our employees from the affected region will work from home," explained a Daimler spokeswoman. If that was not possible, the affected employees would be exempted from work at the moment. Nevertheless, production at the Rastatt plant was continuing even now, she said.

Other companies in the region bordering France decided even later to exempt employees from the border region. ZF Friedrichshafen, the world's fifth-largest automotive supplier (driveline and chassis technology), did not furlough workers from the French border region until the Friday night shift. About 1,000 of the 9,000 workers, including 700 in production, are affected. According to ZF, the company wants to make up for the loss of production as best it can with temporary workers.

At Ford in Saarlouis, about 800 workers who travel across the border from France are to stay at home starting yesterday (Monday). A Ford spokesperson said that administrative staff could work from home. Production workers would have to run down their overtime and vacation allowances. The company would switch from two-shift to one-shift operations.

The situation at Ford is common elsewhere. Employees are forced to work by the corporations despite the high risk of infection, and if they have to be released from work, they pay for it by losing overtime and vacations. Production workers are particularly affected, but also those in logistics centres, trades and commercial services—in other words, all those who cannot work on a laptop from home.

Last week, for example, logistics giant Amazon called on all employees worldwide to work from home "if you can"! In other words, not those workers who do heavy manual labour in the huge logistics and distribution centres or making deliveries.

Rolf Geffken, a labour lawyer based in Bremen, wrote about

Amazon on Facebook at the beginning of March, "There, people who obviously have a cold are being asked to continue working. Nobody controls the situation in the factories. Of course: Production must go on."

The unions are on the side of the corporations. On its website, the IG Metall, which likes to call itself the largest union in the world, is calling on employees to go to work. The homepage links to an article in which the union explains to its more than 2 million members that they have to work!

The very first question, "Can I stay away from work for fear of contagion?" is answered clearly, "No. Workers may only stay away from work if they are actually unfit for work. If they are not, they are obliged to work."

Workers and their families must not be allowed to pay for the coronavirus crisis with their incomes, their social achievements and even their lives. Workers around the world are beginning to fight for their health in wildcat strikes: postal workers in London, bus drivers in Paris, Fiat-Chrysler workers in the US and Canada. Especially in Italy, strikes are spreading to many factories and plants.

In Germany, too, workers must organize themselves to enforce the immediate closure of all non-essential businesses. Workers' lives must be protected, and the further spread of the coronavirus prevented.

The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party) calls for the formation of action committees in factories and plants and for the discussion and implementation of the following demands:

- * Immediate closure of non-essential factories and plants!
- * Full compensation for lost working hours; no deduction of holidays or overtime accounts!
- * For a massive and globally coordinated response to the pandemic!
- * For workers' control over health and safety in factories and plants!

To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>