

Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

The strike wave threatens social chaos

Metalworkers' "selective strikes" threaten to bring much of European industry to a halt.

On May 14, the German metalworkers began their pre-announced strike to demand the 35-hour work week, sparking a process which could lead to the disintegration of Europe. Although they first put no more than 13,000 workers on strike, the effect has been maximum, because the strike hits the key suppliers of parts to the automobile industry. If the auto industries run out of material before the strike is over, 580,000 auto workers and another 900,000 in the supply industries will be out of work within two or three weeks. In some cases, where companies have not built reserve stockpiles, they will cease production by the end of May.

Not just Germany's auto industry is paralyzed by the strike, but also that of most of the other European countries: In Holland, the Opel (General Motors) and Volkswagen branches are threatened with short-time because they depend on deliveries from Germany. In addition, 40% of all cars sold in the country are of German origin, and salesmen maintain only smaller inventory stocks because of high maintenance costs.

In England, a stoppage in the delivery of Volkswagen engines will freeze sections of car production at British Leyland. The same holds for Belgium, where 37,500 autoworkers will be idled if their companies don't receive crucial parts from Germany. Sweden's two main car producers, Saab-Scania and Volvo, are affected because they depend on deliveries from West Germany.

Even the machine and machine-tool sectors are hit: In Finland, the three major producers in this branch, Valmet, Waertsila, and Ahlstrom will shut down if the parts from Germany don't arrive. In Austria, Voest-Alpine, the country's largest machine-producer, depends on parts delivered from West Germany.

Thus, the strike in Germany has already launched a wave of potential paralysis of one of the key industrial sectors of Western Europe. Even in France and Italy, where automobile production is largely independent from German deliveries, the sector is hit by strikes. Though not directly connected, these strikes are considered an integral part of the general strike wave coordinated by the European Trade Union Congress (ETUC) headquartered in Brussels. At its last European congress in April 1982, the ETUC called for the "reduction of weekly work time to 35 hours," to be implemented in all European countries: "At the national and sectoral levels, trade union organizations will carry out parallel actions to achieve these objectives."

While the aim of the 35-hour work week has been said to create more jobs, since each individual worker would work less, the final aim is a new social order in Europe. Franz Steinkühler, the deputy chairman of Europe's largest union, the German metalworkers with 2.5 million members, said in an interview to the Dutch daily *Algemeen Dagblad* that the German strike was "just the prelude to a long battle for

power between labor and management on a European scale . . . it is a fight for a new balance of power in Europe's society."

Referring to his union's influential position within the European labor movement, Steinkühler warned that in case German management tries to collapse the strike through mass lock-outs, the union's "sister organizations in the neighboring countries will not abandon us." He predicted solidarity strikes throughout Europe, which would mount into a head-on clash with most of the governments whose austerity policies have ignited labor's rage.

The German metalworkers seem to want to provoke such a situation. One of the strike leaders in Germany, the chairman of the Stuttgart metalworkers district, Eisenmann, said on German TV: "We hope that management loses its head soon, because that would help us in our solidarity mobilization!" Indeed, the management of the German metal sector has already locked out 65,000 workers, and another 30,000 are to follow on May 30. Since several of the country's main automakers, such as BMW, Audi, and the largest tire producer, Continental, have announced short-time for another 40,000 workers, more than 200,000 German metalworkers are idle—either through strike or lock-out. By the end of May, this figure is expected to jump to between 300,000 and 500,000, if not more.

This might be the tripwire for European-wide solidarity strikes and other actions coordinated through the ETUC. As things line up now, the results of European-wide action will be politically suicidal, since it will demand the dismantling of U.S. nuclear missiles in Europe, as well as the 35-hour week. Is there a political alternative? That question will be taken up next week in this column.