

German Auto Workers in the Crisis

Tuesday 2 February 2010, by [FEELEY Dianne](#) (Date first published: 15 January 2010).

GERMAN AUTO WORKERS, unlike their U.S. brothers and sisters, were somewhat sheltered from the economic crisis in 2009. Given that it was an election year, the government passed a law last March that supplemented their wages when they worked a “short” week. Between what they were paid by their employer and the government supplement, they earned 65-90% of their usual wage. The government also had a version of “cash for clunkers” so some auto plants were at full production.

Following the September 27th elections, however, with a more right-wing government in office, German auto workers do not expect that the legislation will be renewed. In October approximately 50 auto workers from Stuttgart, Hamburg, Köln and Berlin came together to assess the economic crisis and develop a response. Hosted by Transnationals Information Exchange (TIE), the conference included a handful of auto workers and researchers from other countries.

At the conference I found German auto workers grappling with exactly the same problems we face in U.S. auto industry: employer demands for speedup and worker “flexibility,” worsening conditions on the job, management threats to pit plants against each other (“whipsawing”). While U.S. auto workers fear outsourcing of their jobs to Mexico and China, German auto workers fear outsourcing to countries in Eastern Europe, where the wages are lower.

The conference organizers posed the questions: What are the economic and political dimensions of the crisis? What are the possibilities of solidarity and resistance at the plant level? How can we build alliances beyond the shop floor? What are the elements of an alternative program? What are the possibilities of transforming unions?

Although the starting points differed in various plants across Germany, the beginning discussion revealed the extent of the crisis. Given the overcapacity of the global industry — which can produce more than 90 million vehicles a year — and the reality that increasing productivity does not lead to an increase in the number of jobs, everyone was open to exploring a different manufacturing model.

Winfried Wolf, an expert on the European transport industry and co-author of *Reverse European transport policy NOW!* (English/German pamphlet) and *Weltwirtschaftskrise & Krise der Autoindustrie*, challenged auto workers to support a policy that put mass transit at the center.

Unlike no other continent, Europe still has a rail infrastructure that makes it viable as an alternative to the car and short-distance air traffic. Tracks stretch 215,000 kilometers from Portugal to the Ukraine, from Sweden to Italy.

British rail, privatized in 1996, was to be the blueprint for all Europe. Just four years ago the transport ministers of the European Union (EU) directed every member state to split ownership of rail infrastructure from rail services by 2009. Given more integrated train/track controls this makes sense only to prepare for privatization.

However the British model has resulted in a growing number of deaths and injuries, highlighting deteriorating safety. At the same time Britain has the highest ticket prices throughout the EU. As a consequence, several EU states have delayed the directive’s implementation.

A New Transport Model

With the double whammy of the economic crisis and growing reality of impending climate warming, there is still the possibility of developing a different EU transportation model. Clearly privatization and disinvestment from railroads are not in the public's best interest. In fact, while industry, energy and households have all managed to decrease the amount of CO₂ produced in the EU since 1990, CO₂ emissions traceable to car/truck and air transport increased by one third.

Currently large state subsidies underwrite expansion of air and car traffic while the true cost of transportation remains hidden. For this reason, notes Wolf, California and South African wines are cheaper in Europe than wine from France, Germany or Italy.

In May 2009 eighteen organizations including the National Union of Rail, Maritime & Transport Workers worked with Wolf to develop RailEurope2025, a modest blueprint for reprioritizing public transit. It puts forward both social and economic arguments for an end to an EU transport policy that promotes car/truck and air transport, and establishes specific goals.

Aside from the fact that auto workers and their families would benefit from the reduced hassle, noise, environmental damage and injury/death from car crashes, why should auto workers support a program that may threaten current jobs? Are we still facing the dilemma: our jobs vs. our lives?

Wolf points out that globally there are eight million auto workers. Yet while production has doubled over the last 20 years, the auto work force has not increased. He sees three factors which enable the rail industry to be job creating and sustaining: They create more jobs per billion Euros than the auto industry; these jobs are high quality, and they're permanent.

Wolf notes that there were two million European auto workers (including suppliers) in 1978 and about the same number today. Meanwhile throughout the EU there are slightly less than a million rail workers with another million in urban public transport and an additional 200,000 who work in the train building industry. Implementing RailEurope2025 would double rail traffic and directly create at least a million additional jobs throughout the EU (railroads, train building, research and technology).

What RailEurope2025 outlines would also cut CO₂ emissions in the industry by a quarter. It would increase "green modes" of European transport from 20% to 60%, with car and air traffic ("red modes") reduced to 40%. This, along with continued reduction of CO₂ emissions in other economic areas, could cut Europe's emissions in half, a figure close to the needed EU reduction.

Lars Henriksson, a worker at a Swedish Volvo plant, reinforced Wolf's analysis and challenged fellow auto workers to use our "social muscles" to demand jobs that promote public transit. Who else is as strategically placed? Unlike the CEOs in the auto industry, he maintained there is no technical fix that can maintain car manufacturing at the current level. This is clearly unsustainable.

Of course this challenge is much more difficult to meet in the United States. We lack the density of railroads and urban transit systems, we lack an industrial policy geared toward public need and we have an even higher density of vehicles. We would also need to revitalize our cities. Decent-paying auto jobs hang by a thread. Clearly the crisis is deeper. This indicates that we have an overwhelming need to break with the old model of increased auto production, ever-larger highways, expanding airports and a suburban lifestyle.

Dianne Feeley

P.S.

* From Against The Current, ATC 144, January-February 2010.