



Siemens Unions from Germany, US, and Canada Discuss Collaboration and Organizing in Orlando

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In February, six North American unions (UAW, IAM, USW, IUE-CWA, IBEW, and Unifor) representing plants in the United States and Canada and the German trade union, IG Metall, met at the Disney Coronado Springs Resort in Orlando, Florida. The goals of the union meeting were laid out by the welcoming remarks of IBEW President Lonnie Stephenson, IUE-CWA President Jim Clark, and IG Metall Secretary Reinhard Hahn. The attendees had 3 basic goals of the meeting: the unions sought to better advocate for Siemens employees by coordinating with each other within the US and Canada and with IG Metall in Siemens home country of Germany; to learn about the codetermination system and find ways to apply these lessons to benefit workers while benefiting the company; and to achieve an agreement with the company on the rights of workers in North America and live up to the International Framework Agreement that Siemens agreed to in 2012.

Over two days the representatives from the various unions discussed their relationships with each other and with the American and Canadian management of Siemens. Robert Kensbock from the Siemens Central Works Council presented the general status of the union members' relationship to Siemens in Germany. The company is implementing "Siemens 2020" to streamline its operations. Unions and works councils are preparing and sharing strategies for dealing with changes ahead for Siemens employees. IG Metall was able to negotiate an agreement to prevent layoffs and plant closures in Germany. Since the policy was agreed upon, Siemens opened its first German plant in 15 years. American union representatives, though generally not consulted by the company on managerial decisions, took the lessons of the positive, cooperative relationship the trade unionists and Works Councilors had with Siemens to heart.

In the United States, Siemens is running an advertising campaign called "Ingenuity for Life." The goal is to portray Siemens technology and its impact on customers and society at large. The attending unions mirrored that sentiment and agreed that a strategic plan was necessary to engage the company to build on the craft expertise of the members and engaging the company to ensure productive relationships that unions have with management are extended to other plants. Additionally, the unions agreed that building better communications networks with one another was one simple way to coordinate strategy and share information about Siemens, whether for bargaining or organizing new members.



Reinhard Hahn, Secretary of IG Metall addresses the conference.

Collaborating for the Future

The attendees discussed different forms of collaboration between labor and management, between North American trade unions and the IGM, and among the North American unions were the overarching themes of the conference. Though American unions occasionally conflict with each other about strategy or organizational culture, union activists and leadership hold a common solidarity. Responsible union leaders are putting petty differences aside and promoting solidarity with one another.



Attendees from 5 different unions discuss common problems during the “World Café” exercise.

Conference attendees agreed to explore better avenues of communication and collaborate during bargaining and organizing within Siemens. Each plant has a separate collective agreement. When periodic negotiations occur, the bargaining committees benefit from understanding the company, the other plants, and the creative solutions to problems employed by other unions.

Attendees also learned of the German co-determination model. The input that German workers have regarding their employers is astounding to American and Canadian union members who generally have little control or voice outside of a narrow set of collectively bargained issues. However, some collaborative relationships similar to the German model have emerged in a few of the plants. Wayne Cupp of IUE-CWA in Ohio shared his experiences with production planning meetings with the company where union leadership discusses the plants future production and offers input to give a voice to the workforce that produces the electrical motors and drives at his plant.



Reobert Kensbock, Deputy Chairman of the Central Works Council, holds a Harley Davidson handkerchief, a gift from the unions that manufacture the motorcycles, the United Steelworkers and the International Association of Machinists.

Apprenticeships and Training

Since investing in training is costly for the company and many companies choose not to invest, there is a collective action problem for employee training. Luckily, unions have been overcoming collective action problems since they were invented. Advocating better formal training for operating and maintaining plant equipment and informal on-the-job mentoring to give entry level employees more skills will benefit both the employees and the company.

The union attendees discussed the future of technical training and how to address the shortcomings of Siemens programs and the vocational education system in the US. American high schools are cutting vocational training programs and there are few options for union or government supported apprenticeship programs. The unions see the problems with production and, therefore, their job security coming in the future. Some solutions suggested by the attendees were starting a mentoring program with retirees teaching younger employees skills they developed over their careers, engaging high schools and community colleges to both recruit workers and teach general technical skills to apply to the workplace, and engage Siemens on the way management and unions operate the in-plant apprenticeship programs.

Organizing Trade Unions and Respect for Siemens Employees’ Rights

The German, American, and Canadian trade unions are also greatly concerned by the restrictive environment for employees to organize trade unions in the United States. Companies in the US routinely fire or threaten employees that seek to join a union. Labor relations at Siemens are generally positive and unions seek to extend these relationships to other unorganized plants. Conference attendees discussed a variety of proposals that would build an effective multi-union organizing campaign and what elements of an agreement with the company would best protect Siemens employees’ right to organize and avoid contentious or negative relationships with plant managers and executives at the company.