

Billionaire investor a new force to reckon with at Lufthansa

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German rail industry tycoon Heinz Hermann Thiele is also a force to be reckoned with at Lufthansa who threatened to scuttle the airline's rescue

Derided as a "caveman capitalist" by the unions and dubbed a "patriarch" by others, German billionaire Heinz Hermann Thiele, is also a force to be reckoned with at Lufthansa.

At 79 years old, rail industry tycoon Thiele is one of the richest men in

Germany.

Having only recently acquired 15.5 percent of Lufthansa shares, making him the biggest shareholder, he played a key role in Thursday's extraordinary meeting held online that approved the nine billion euro (\$10.1 billion) rescue from Berlin.

Thiele, described in the media as a "patriarch" of the traditional metal-bashing economy, earlier made no secret of his scepticism about the state climbing aboard with a 20 percent stake, which would water down existing owners' holdings.

He believes part-nationalisation would hinder necessary moves to get Lufthansa fighting fit again, possibly including painful job cuts.

But on the eve of the crucial vote, managers at Lufthansa heaved a sigh of relief as Thiele said he would back the bailout to avoid insolvency.

Family business

Thiele's fortune is founded on "Mittelstand" companies, quietly thriving mid-sized firms often still in family hands that form the backbone of Europe's top economy.

Married with two children and a trained lawyer, he started out in 1969 in the patents office at brakes manufacturer Knorr-Bremse.

In the 1980s, he saved the company from bankruptcy in a loan-backed buyout, transforming it into a market leader for rail and heavy truck brakes.

On the factory floor, workers hustled for 42 hours per week rather than the 35 typical elsewhere in the sector, forging the core of Thiele's

wealth.

These days, Forbes magazine estimates his net worth at around 15 billion euros.

Thiele still holds 65 percent of Knorr-Bremse, and his daughter is also a member of the supervisory board.

His son Henrik led the company's Asia division before going his own way a few years ago.

Even the [financial crisis](#) did not slow Thiele's ascent, offering opportunities to expand in Asia and to wrest rail track maker Vossloh from its reluctant family owners.

His portfolio even extends as far as a cattle ranch in Uruguay.

"I am a businessman, and I'll remain one to my last breath," he once told Germany's Manager Magazin.

In the past, Thiele has not been shy of drawing attention outside the [business world](#) with barbed comments on politics and international relations.

'Competent' Putin

He declared to Manager that Russian President Vladimir Putin "may not be an exemplary democrat but is a very competent politician".

In the depths of the euro crisis, Thiele complained that the AfD, founded by sceptics of the single currency that has since drifted far to the right, was not yet represented in parliament.

At Lufthansa, Thiele's intransigence faced with the prospect of state aid may have supported bosses' position in a roundabout way.

Throughout weeks-long talks over the rescue, bosses' greatest fear was ministers hemming in their room to make necessary tough decisions to save the company.

"Lufthansa doesn't need the state as a shareholder to restructure itself," he told the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung daily recently.

Looking ahead to Lufthansa's post-bailout future, he told the same newspaper he "will continue to exert influence", but declined to elaborate.

After a Knorr-Bremse factory closed in Berlin in 2017, metalworkers' union IG Metall called Thiele a "caveman capitalist" with "methods from deep in the last millennium".

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