

“I am a benevolent Dictator”

How Fil Filipov restructures the Atlas plants



Very close also through their commitment for the Atlas orange:
Fil Filipov together with his wife Veronique at the Delmenhorst plant.

The new man at the top of Atlas Maschinen GmbH radiates a rough charm. In an interview with *dk*, the 63-year-old said what has to change at the three plants.

BY THOMAS BREUER

DELMENHORST-GANDERKESEE. If you want to talk business with him, you get 29 minutes. Fil Filipov says that, if the meeting takes longer, everything said before will only be repeated. The 63-year-old is the owner and argumentative leader of the new Atlas Maschinen GmbH which comprises the former Terex locations at Delmenhorst, Ganderkesee, and Vechta with a total of 650 employees.

Wherever Filipov goes to do business, his wife Veronique, who is two decades his junior, is almost always at his side. She is, he says, his partner in life and in business. And, if he should be too old for business, she could take his place; although she has a significantly more reserved demeanor than her husband who is radiating a rough charm.

45 years ago, the long-time manager of the American construction machinery group Terex escaped from Bulgaria, had to live in a Greek refugee camp, and finally made it to America where he was able to realize his “American dream”. Filipov worked his way up from unskilled laborer to chief executive; he does not have a diploma or anything comparable, as he states. The couple’s home is sometimes in Chicago and sometimes in Paris.

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If somebody wants to learn more about him, the manager thrust his book “Filosophien” into his hands. On 172 pages it offers autobiographical stories, family photos, and business advice. For example: “Nothing is as important for a successful business as the sense of urgency.”

dk: Mr. Filipov, how is the mood at Atlas Maschinen GmbH?

Fil Filipov: I guarantee that, if you ask the 650 employees what they think about the past 60 days of my work, most of them will be very, very satisfied. If a patient is sick, it is not enough to pray at church, but you have to act. And that's what I have done. Some people probably do not like that.

In particular those who already had to leave.

That's no minor issue. But if you combine two functions, there will be one who is no longer needed. We are not a very big company, but there were people in management I had not met even once in 60 days. How do you want to reduce costs if you don't do it with people who are highly paid?

How do you deal with your companies?

I either talk in front of the workers or with small groups of people. I spent 15 hours a day in my companies and do not intend to bring outside people into the company. I know the job, the products, the customers, and the suppliers.

At the moment, is there enough work for everybody?

Look, in the meantime we have a lot of work. I came here and have ended short-time work. Now it looks like we cannot ship some models before October, but our customers cannot wait that long. Of the 650 employees in the operations at Delmenhorst, Ganderkesee, and Vechta, we have 280 doing only administrative work. But I want people who work in production – and not only watch.

This surely does not only apply to Atlas.

Correct, at this moment I have 1250 people in different companies working for me in Germany. I am the boss of 17 locations in Germany, plus of companies in China, Mexico, and France. And all of them I manage separately. My approach might not be very popular but only with people who do are not willing to work.

"I am not the Red Cross. Those who don't work, I will fire."

What do you excel in?

A look at my life will show that I can restore companies in tough times so they will function again. Now we are in a tough time and I know what to do.

What motivates you as a 63-year-old to face this difficult task? Money?

My motivation is the new challenge rather than the money. My challenge is to restore the power that was here originally. I like working in Germany. The people are very quality-oriented and much disciplined. I am very happy when I see how, just a short while ago, the German government has brought the 80-billion-euro savings package on its way. In other countries they cannot do that in a lifetime. With Atlas, I act the same way: I make decisions, I do not ask questions. I am a kind of benevolent dictator. I always say: If you want to be loved, buy a dog. I do not need to be loved. My wife loves me, God has given me good health, and I want to be respected because I have a job to do.

Your opponents are having a hard time with that.

They do not talk about it that Atlas lost a lot of money and that the Vechta location would have faced closing by the end of this year. I want to manufacture here in Germany, efficiently and with a sense for quality. I will not shut-down the plants but want to make them grow. I get accused of arguing with the works council. No. In the plants I have 30 people doing nothing for production and only holding meetings. But in Germany the rule is that, only from 200 employees up, I have to exempt a works council member from work. So he will work. And I will not pay an engineer for the 20 minutes he needs to boot his computer. I am not the Red Cross; the law is on my side. Those who don't work, I will fire.

How do you want to permanently utilize Atlas to capacity again?

I bring back work from subcontractors that will be enough for another 200 people. As an example: For an excavator there may be five parts we buy from Holland or other Germany companies. I want to do without that and produce these parts myself. That brings in work; and why should parts be driven all over the place for painting? We can do that here at Vechta. At Atlas we have the foundation for a very successful company. I am very, very sure that I can stop the losses within six to nine months. Until then, I will regularly be on-site; then everybody should be in his right place.

Do you motivate your people or do you just frighten them?

I tell them what is going on. Those who are willing to work are very motivated. Those in the company, who had not been willing to work, will oppose me. But then they have to leave. Now or later.