

Interview with a GM-Opel worker in Germany

"Our great grandfathers would turn in their graves."

A WSWS reporting team
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A reporting team from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with a 35-year-old Opel worker from Bochum about his experiences in recent years. He has worked for Opel for 15 years and presently is employed in the logistics area, where car components are loaded for delivery to the Polish Opel plant.

WSWS: How have working conditions changed over the years?

FE: The stress has increased. Before we used to work on the assembly line. Now our production method is called 'cell production.' That means we work together in groups on specific car components and assemble them.

WSWS: That is the teamwork which was introduced a few years ago, isn't it?

FE: No, teamwork as it was introduced back then is dead. There haven't been any group talks in which we could discuss the work for a long time now. Many groups have also been torn apart by changes in production runs and conversions.

The only thing which has remained is working in groups. But today only the number of items counts. We don't, however, manage to produce as of yet the number of items set by the company as the goal. 500 Astras per shift should be built. That's 1,500 cars a day, and the number is supposed to go up even further in the future. But we don't even manage the 1,500 at the moment.

WSWS: In other words, the teamwork, which was hailed by the works council members and the trade unions as the 'humanisation of work,' has turned out to be just team piecework?

FE: If you want. Yes, you could say that.

WSWS: Have new workers been hired because of high demand for the Astra?

FE: Yes, exactly 585, but for the most part it is

students, who will work here for three months. The other workers also have limited contracts. The works council is doing what it can so that they can at least work here a whole year and claim unemployment benefits afterwards.

Unlike in the past, they don't fight for unlimited contracts now. The workers' movement has really died out. If our great grandfathers could see how things are looking for us they'd turn in their graves. Even the generation of '68 managed quite a few things, but everything is being taken back now.

WSWS: Your current works council chairman was an oppositionist ten years ago. Has anything changed during his term in office?

FE: No, nothing has changed at all, or at least not in a positive sense. He carries on where his predecessor left off. That's why he's not very popular among the workers. But the petition a long time ago, which 4,000 colleagues signed calling for his resignation, wasn't of any use either. He has the power and we hardly have any influence on the works council.

For example, a few weeks ago we had works council elections. The current chairman only came in third. Actually a clear vote by the workers. Nevertheless, he was made chairman of the works council again. The works council elects the chairman, not the workers.

WSWS: You also have new so-called site agreements. What do they mean for you?

FE: Cuts and more stress. Because the increase in pay rates only counted for 1.25 percent, we will be getting less and less money in our pockets. Everything else is getting dearer. Additional pay for night shifts, for example, is being cut as well. Many colleagues are working endless overtime to compensate for losses.

Even someone like me, who actually disapproves of overtime, has to do 10 hours of it a week. I don't like it, but there's no other way.

WSWS: What is the effect of coupling the Christmas bonus to the number of days off sick?

FE: Well, you just don't go to the doctor's today because of a small injury or a cold. You have to work to receive the entire Christmas bonus. That's probably why the number of work accidents has dropped. Many just aren't reported any more. First of all because no one wants to be written off sick because of a minor injury, and, secondly, the foreman now has to write a report for every work accident.

WSWS: What do you expect from the new Opel boss, Cowger?

FE: I know absolutely nothing about him. He will probably only introduce himself to the staff in September. I don't expect anything good from him though. He's supposed to take even harder action than Herman. They banished Herman to Russia where he is supposed to build up a car factory there--although only the few can afford a car there. That means the cars will be imported to Western Europe again.

WSWS: That is the result of globalisation--the companies look for the cheapest labour world-wide and exploit. We are also looking at this conflict in relation to the strike of the General Motors workers in the USA. What do you know about it?

FE: Not a lot, just what I read about it in the newspaper. There was once a leaflet in the factory, but there wasn't much on it. The works council doesn't even report on it. It acts as if the strike didn't exist at all. The chairman says to himself, when we can't even help ourselves, what can we hope to do for our American colleagues?

WSWS: For instance, as a first move, workers here could collaborate internationally with the General Motors workers, exchange knowledge and views and do so independently of the trade unions and works councils.

FE: That's right, we should collaborate internationally, but how? The trade unions have the power and the means, but don't do it. To do that we would have to turn the trade unions upside down. It could have happened with the former internal opposition, the Opel-Forum, if its leaders had really carried through the break with the trade unions. Then a

change would have gone through the workers' movement, not only at Opel, but throughout Germany. But the union smashed the opposition brutally and mercilessly, and you have to say the opposition knuckled under.

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