

Opel car company prepares mass job cuts throughout Europe

Part 2: The role played by the Bochum factory committee

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In the coming months, Germany's Opel concern, a subsidiary of the world's biggest car manufacturer General Motors, will conduct the most extensive cuts in workplaces and wages ever undertaken by the company in so short a time. Production capacity is to fall by 15 percent and costs are to be reduced by 4 billion marks throughout Europe.

When Opel Executive Chairman Carl-Peter Forster announced the plan in mid-August, he was also unwilling to exclude the possible closure of whole factories and sites in Germany, such as the one in Bochum. This was a blatant attempt to intimidate employees with a rouse concocted with and approved by the trade union and the factory committees. The aim of the factory committees was to facilitate the mutually agreed demolition of jobs and cutting of wages—to be seen as “the better of two evils” and “the only option in view of the threatened closures”.

The following is the concluding part of a two-part article on the Opel restructuring plan.

The threat of closures, particularly that of the Opel factory in Bochum, was neither arbitrary nor absurd. The Bochum plant and its works committee chairman, Peter Jaszczyk, are playing a key role in the various manoeuvres aimed at implementing the Olympia restructuring programme.

Not only are thousands of Opel's unsold Astra model piling up in Bochum, production of the company's only successful model, the Zafira, is also racing ahead at breakneck speed. Consequently, significant opposition to the planned restructuring from Bochum workers, in the form of a united struggle with the workers from other sites and in other states, would strike at the company's most sensitive nerve. Moreover, owing to the advanced stage already reached by the globalisation of production, it would immediately draw in the support of workers from other factories throughout Europe. As former Opel head Wolfgang Strinz emphasised on Phoenix-TV at the start of the year, a strike in Bochum would lead to the closure of all of Opel's 17 European plants within a day or two.

Therefore, it is of overwhelming importance for the company to pacify and discipline the Bochum employees if it is to succeed in enforcing the restructuring programme in all its plants. The IG Metall engineering trade union and the factory committee in Bochum have taken on this task with great gusto and are being supported with equal fervour by the SPD (Social Democratic Party). Wolfgang Clement, SPD governor in North Rhine-Westphalia, sped directly to the Bochum plant with Ernst Schwanhold, his minister of trade, to give their full backing to the trade union committee and its chairman.

Immediately after the announcement of the redevelopment plan, Peter Jaszczyk rushed from one television interview to the next, from talks with leading representatives of the biggest daily newspapers to meetings with local press agents and an appearance with the SPD minister president. According to the national newspaper, the *Frankfurter Rundschau* (August

31), he was trying to hog the limelight as “the powerful labour leader from Bochum” in order to stress his warning to workers to “free themselves from all illusions” and “look reality in the eye”.

The previous record of the factory committee:

In recent years, workers in Bochum have had firsthand experience regarding the consequences of this line of argument. During the five years of Jaszczyk's leadership of the factory committee, the destruction of almost 3,000 jobs in the Bochum plant has been justified in a similar manner. Today just half of the total of 25,000 employees who worked at the plant 15 years ago remain.

In May this year, and prior to the announcement of the Olympia restructuring plan for the entire company, the majority of the factory committee signed a new employment agreement which paved the way for the further dismantling of jobs in Bochum by extending shift work and increasing flexibility in the parts shop. This accord granted company management the right to invoke the principle of flexibility to determine for each employee, not only the number of weekly working hours (from 30 to 40), but even the times for clocking on and off (between 6 a.m. and 11 p.m.)—and workers were to accept these conditions at only a week's notice. Furthermore, not just one but two Saturday shifts (mornings and afternoons) as well as the introduction of a permanent night shift are to be arranged in future when the need arises.

The factory committee also agreed to staggered midday breaks during production so that 1,200 Astra workers will be able take over from their Zafira workmates while they are at lunch, and thus ensure continuous production of their assembly line. In this way, the committee is organising further cost-cutting and increased productivity for the company, instead of taking advantage of the current strong demand for the Zafira to force management to create new jobs.

All of these concessions were endorsed by the factory committee in the name of “defending local work sites and jobs” and imposed on workers under the constant threat of a further destruction of jobs if they failed to comply.

However, with the introduction of the Olympia programme this increased destruction of jobs is now taking place anyway. Jaszczyk has told the press that, “looking at things realistically”, a further 1,300 to 1,500 jobs will disappear in Bochum due to the winding down of production of the Astra. Moreover, as the chairman of the factory committee explained, about 1,000 jobs will disappear annually up to the year 2005 in line with existing contract agreements, so that—“looking at things realistically and without any illusions”—at most 7,000 jobs will remain.

According to Jaszczyk's own statements, the aim of his negotiations with the company's management is “to defend the Bochum site” by attracting production of the new six-gear transmission systems to Bochum

and outdoing “the competition from 19 other sites”. He talks of a European solution to the Astra problem, meaning by this that job cuts sought by the company should first be imposed on employees in Antwerp or some other European factory location.

The current strong demand for the Zafira could be used as an effective means of organising united industrial action against the company at *all* sites in order to defend *all* employees, *every* job and *all* wages. But the IG Metall union and the factory committee in Bochum are doing the opposite. They are using the Zafira as evidence that the workers at Bochum can look to the future with confidence and continue to maintain industrial peace. It will be workers at other sites who will have to suffer.

Irrespective of the final form of the programme cooked up by the bureaucrats of the factory committee and the trade union together with company management, it is absolutely certain that the Bochum workers will be saddled with the consequences of the new concessions: flexible working hours, increased pace of work and decreased wages. And what will happen if sales of the Zafira also decline? On this issue the factory committee and IG Metall maintain a stony silence.

In conducting this sort of politics, Peter Jaszczyk is in fact dancing on the rim of a volcano. He is bound to be fully aware of this, on the one hand, because of his own experience as the former leader of workers opposed to the previous factory committee chairman and, on the other, as a result of several rebellions by workers against him since the beginning of his term in office.

The transformation of Peter Jaszczyk:

During the 1980s Peter Jaszczyk, a long-standing member of the Stalinist Communist Party of Germany (DKP), was leader of the workers’ opposition at Opel (the so-called Opel Forum, later known as the Opel Metal Workers). This movement limited itself, however, to purely trade unionist demands and often exhausted itself in verbal exchanges aimed at the company management and the then factory committee chairman, Günter Perschke—and later, Rolf Breuer. Like the DKP, Jaszczyk and his opposition movement never took issue with the capitalist profit system itself.

When a majority of workers joined with other opposition forces to defeat the previously unchallenged rule of the right-wing Social Democratic factory committee in 1990, IG Metall instigated mass expulsion proceedings against Jaszczyk and 80 other union members. He reacted to this with his usual “recognition of reality”, i.e., he grovelled before the trade union bureaucracy in utter submission.

At the same time, the inglorious collapse of the Stalinist SED (Socialist Unity Party) bureaucracy in the GDR (former German Democratic Republic in the East) also certainly played a part in moving him to this course of action. The collapse of Stalinism in East Germany also pulled his party, the DKP, along with it into the grave—politically and financially speaking. Completely demoralised and bereft of all financial support, many DKP activists in the unions at that time decided to depart from their merely verbal opposition to capitalism—in favour of an even more intimate cooperation with it.

Jaszczyk joined the SPD and was subsequently active as spokesman for the right wing of the factory committee. In 1996 he became chairman of the factory committee, a member of the supervisory board and, as he himself described in the *Frankfurter Rundschau* last August, a “co-manager”. Since then he has continued to promote exclusively plant-based politics, of the sort pursued by his predecessors, but by none so energetically and cunningly as Jaszczyk.

From the very beginning, however, his approach met with fierce resistance from factory employees. Soon after assuming office and despite strong criticism from the ranks of the workers, he pushed through the signing of an agreement with the company, entailing far-reaching wage concessions and flexibility measures. Subsequently, 4,000 workers—more than a quarter of the entire workforce at the time—signed a petition to

demand Jaszczyk’s immediate resignation. Of course, he refused to comply with this demand. At the next factory committee elections in 1998, it was not Jaszczyk but rather a rival candidate by the name of Hans Reppel who received the votes of an overwhelming majority of the workers. It was only the bureaucratic manoeuvring of the majority in the factory committee that secured Jaszczyk’s re-election to the post of chairman of the trade union factory committee.

In spring of this year, his politics had provoked so much indignation and anger on the part of workers—in particular regarding the conflict over the previously mentioned contract in the parts shop—that he faced the threat of losing the majority vote in the factory committee and being voted out of office. What has kept him in power up until now is not so much any significant support for his politics from the workers, but rather the absence of any fundamental and creditworthy alternative.

An oppositional movement amongst Opel workers, setting itself the task of fighting against Jaszczyk’s political stance and that of the factory committee, would not merely concern itself with the personal corruption and compliant “co-manager” role of one or more individuals. More importantly, it would have to confront the whole strategy and perspective of the trade union.

What is the way forward for auto workers?

This is precisely the task that auto workers at Opel and all other car companies have to face up to if they are to free themselves from the accelerating cycle of job destruction, wage concessions, relocation of work sites abroad and plant closures.

Although the outmoded and anarchic nature of this economic system is so patently obvious, especially with regard to the crisis in the auto industry, at the core of trade union and factory committee politics is the defence of the capitalist profit system.

Under the conditions of production for private profit, the fact that workers, aided by modern technology, can produce things more quickly, in greater volume and with better quality than ever before is a curse rather than a blessing. Owing to capitalist competition, companies are forced to produce far more than they can ever sell. For the purposes of securing the wealth of a few major investors on the stock exchange, the solution to this problem, dictated by the system, is to destroy hundreds of thousands of jobs together with countless factories and their machinery—with all the ensuing human misery.

Nevertheless, trade union bureaucrats and factory committee members defend this system, body and soul, because their own interests as a privileged layer in capitalist society are organically connected with the profit system in general and the profit of “their” company in particular.

Therefore, they hold the same assumptions as those of their partners in the company boardrooms and banks: namely, that workers are obliged to subordinate their own, even most basic, interests to the demands of the market and profit—their jobs, adequate pay for feeding their families and education for their children, their provision for health and old age.

The nationalistic and local, plant-oriented politics of the trade union and factory committee bureaucrats also arise directly from this perspective.

Under its slogan “defence of Germany as a location for industry”, IG Metall strives to make the exploitation of workers in the German firms—by means of low wage settlements, individual plant instead of national wage agreements, working condition concessions—just as cost-effective and profitable as in Asia or eastern Europe, thereby persuading the companies to remain in the country.

For the factory committees, “defence of local industry” represents a desperate attempt to convince company management that they can increase their profits more quickly by relying on the services of their local factory committee in its role as company policemen and co-managers in cutting jobs and wages, instead of relocating production to “greener pastures” abroad.

In this way, the trade unions and factory committees carry out their

politics of “divide and rule” most effectively against the interests of the workforce. Their proposed “united action” and “European co-operation”, as set out in General Motors’ so-called European Employees’ Forum, merely constitutes a means of spotting emergent labour struggles at an early stage and neutralising them. Their particular aim is to nip in the bud any united local and international struggle of workers in Europe, America and Asia against the major business concerns. This is why, for example, Jaszczyk and IG Metall boycotted a delegation of workers from Bochum who wanted to join a protest of 10,000 General Motors workers in Luton, England against the closure of the Vauxhall plant there at the beginning of the year.

A consequence of the trade union bureaucracy’s defence of the profit system is its cooperation and identification with the SPD, which since the First World War has constituted the most steadfast political agency for the maintenance of the capitalist order against a rebellion from below.

A workers’ opposition that fails to confront and overcome this fundamental programmatic and party political orientation of the factory committees and trade unions, and instead merely restricts itself to demands for more trade union militancy, will not be able to smash the bureaucracy’s appallingly divisive politics of local factory particularism and nationalism. It will be condemned to helplessly await each new round of blackmailing on the part of management and their co-managers in the factory committee, and then to complain about their continuing victories over the workforce.

The group Resistance without Borders (GoG), led by former factory committee member Wolfgang Schaumberg at the Opel plant, is both an instructive and pitiful example of such opposition.

If the struggle against companies like Opel is to be effective and successful, workers will have to counter the global operations and manoeuvrings of capital with their own global strategy: the international alliance of all workforces against the global companies in order to defend every single job.

Such a strategy requires a political struggle to free workers from the programme of the trade unions, the factory committees and the SPD and to orientate them on the basis of their own, independent social perspective. It requires the establishment of a broad political movement with the aim of restructuring society from top to bottom. The guiding principle for this new social order must be that the needs of the working population should have priority in relation to all economic and political decisions, and not the selfish interests of a handful of investors and the rich.

Such a movement of workers will mobilise and unite the forces worldwide to beat back corporate attacks like Opel’s Olympia restructuring plan.



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