German Opel workers: ”We cannot compete with wages of 3-4 euros”

Our reporters
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WSWS reporters spoke with Opel workers at the Bochum Langendreer plant.

A group of older workers from the axle plant said they had worked for Opel in Bochum for 40 years.

“Where will it end if things carry on like this?” Franz asked. “First it was Siemens, then other businesses followed. What they are doing here is only the first step. They want to close it down completely by 2009 or 2010. Where should people work then? Hardly any new jobs are being created in the Ruhr.

“The expansion to the East (of the European Union) is being used to destroy well-paid jobs here and radically lower wages. The consequence is rising unemployment. We cannot compete with wages of 3 to 4 euros ($3.75-$5.00). We have to pay our rent and other housing costs, and these amount to more than 100 euros ($125) a month. Those at the top aren’t bothered about our living conditions, they have their millions.”

Speaking about the planned action day on Tuesday, Horst said, “Our Swedish colleagues also want to participate. You can see how they are trying to play one off against the other. Our trade unions and Betriebsrat (works council—joint union-management committee) have slowly but surely allowed themselves to be divided. They fight against each other, instead of pulling in the same direction. I started work here in 1961. In those days, when we stopped work here, our colleagues at Ruesselsheim also participated. It is not like that now. Today, everyone thinks of his own factory.”

Horst was shocked by the attacks and the actions of the Opel managers. “All we can do is stand here until they are ready to negotiate. What else can we do? If we leave here, we face nothing. We all have families, houses or apartments—the costs keep accumulating, everything has to be paid for.”

Referring to the government’s labour “reforms” and cuts programme, Horst said, “I can’t feed my family with Hartz IV. And we have paid into the state-run insurance schemes for the unemployed, old age pensions, etc. for forty years. Perhaps we might get a redundancy payment, but then our unemployment benefit would be cut back. We have to find a way through this.”

Stefan, 29, works in the gear assembly plant. He criticized the way the union and Betriebsrat had failed to pass on information: “We have had no information from the unions and the Betriebsrat. The press knows more than we do. We are the last to find out what is happening. We have also received no information about the situation in Sweden. It would be better if there were a common strategy, then we could make management understand. Our colleagues in Ruesselsheim are holding back, we don’t hear anything about what is happening there either. There are no direct connections.”

Stefan was angry over the statements of North Rhine Westphalian State Premiere Peer Steinbrueck (Social Democratic Party, SPD), who had told Opel workers who lost their jobs that they should not give up hope and should look for a new job. “It is management who bears the responsibility here, not us. Moreover, there are 5 million others who are already looking for a new job.”

Peter Mueller, 43, works in the parts and accessories department. “I have been at Opel for 27 years,” he said. “I did my apprenticeship here. For ten years, the factory has been cut back, bit by bit. Now the final blow is coming. There are going to be radical cuts. In ten years’ time, there will no longer be an Opel.

“Only people who can best and most systematically close down the factory are being chosen for the highest

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positions. Everything is being smashed up and hived off. It is pure chaos and quality suffers enormously.

"The politicians say it is only half as bad as it seems. But the top brass are filling their pockets and the workers can only apply for social security. If one of us resists and says something, he is immediately chucked out."

Mueller said he feared losing his job. "At my age, I wouldn't get another job. The only thing that is left is to become self-employed. What else is on offer?"

Mueller also spoke about the worsening conditions of work. "There is great pressure from above, from the shift leaders: output, output, output—and quality sinks. If someone is ill, he has to justify this to the management. Like they were serfs. It's like this everywhere today.

"In Sweden, people are being exploited and driven sick. The people in Poland can't afford the cars they build, since they only earn four euros an hour. Who here will still be able to buy a car? The unemployed and people on social security can't do that."

He also expressed doubts about the unions. "The unions should be there for the majority, but they're not. Job cuts always take place with the agreement of the union and the Betriebsrat. The Betriebsrat is put under pressure. They can only agree to whether the whole workforce goes or just a part.

"The situation would look different if the unions called for joint action. Then everybody would take to the streets. The last big strikes were in the 1970s. We should fight together with our colleagues in Poland, Sweden and at other locations. All we hear from the company headquarters in America is profit, profit, profit. They sit in their armchairs and look at their sales and profits. We have to resist this."

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