

The political issues facing Opel workers

WSWS Editorial Board
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The following statement was distributed by the Socialist Equality Party of Germany at the “day of action” protests held October 19 in cities across Europe to protest General Motors’ plans to eliminate 12,000 jobs at its European subsidiaries. The statement is posted on the WSWS in PDF format.

The announcement by the management of General Motors that it intends to wipe out 12,000 of its 63,000 jobs in Europe—including 10,000 jobs at Germany’s Opel plants—has come as a shock to workers at Opel and GM’s other European subsidiaries. Following similarly draconian measures carried out in recent days by major companies such as Siemens, DaimlerChrysler, Volkswagen and Karstadt, the attacks at Opel represent a new stage in the broadside against jobs, wages and social conditions in Germany.

What is involved is far more than localised factory-based conflicts over the defence of particular production facilities. The ruthlessness of GM management in Detroit signifies a concerted assault by big corporations and banks, and the governments that do their bidding, to destroy workers’ living standards and rights.

The aim of this offensive is to establish a social principle that can be summed up as the unrestrained domination of the capitalist market and the total subordination of every aspect of social life to the profit interests of big business. All limitations on profits and the personal enrichment of a small social elite are to be scrapped.

The declaration by local authorities in the Swedish town of Trollhättan that they are prepared to open their child care facilities at night to accommodate the children of car workers and make possible the introduction of a 24-hour, three-shift system at the local GM plant is indicative of the general trend. Nothing is to stand in the way of corporate priorities, whatever the social costs. And the costs to society of these plans will be ruinous.

The unions have nothing to offer in response. On the contrary: they are part of the problem. All of the agreements to give back job security provisions and workplace safeguards won over previous decades bear the imprimatur of the unions and their factory representatives.

Even now, Bertold Huber, the deputy chairman of the main union involved in the dispute, the engineering union IG Metall, has stated that the unions are well aware of the serious situation confronting the company. A joint statement by shop stewards and unions representing all of the GM plants in Europe begins with the words, “The trade unions are conscious of the heavy losses and shrinking market share of General Motors in Europe.”

Here the unions and their representatives make clear that they share the point of view of the company, and unambiguously signal their readiness to enter into negotiations over the implementation of job cuts and further concessions on wages and working conditions.

For their part, workers at the Opel plant in Bochum went on the offensive immediately after news of the company’s plans spread, blockading the gates to their factory. Despite threats of a lockout and repeated demands by the minister for labour, Wolfgang Clement (SPD—Social Democratic Party), that they resume working, the Bochum workers continued their action over the weekend and into the beginning of

this week.

This is a healthy reaction. To pursue this offensive, however, it is necessary to proceed beyond the narrow framework of trade union militancy. Otherwise, there is a danger that a common experience of the past will be repeated: strikes and militant protests isolated by the unions, and then suffocated while union leaders work out a deal that capitulates to the basic demands of management.

The working class needs an entirely new perspective. The most important task confronting Opel workers at their various locations, and the working class as a whole, is to break with the opportunist politics of compromise and concessions that are the stock-in-trade of the social democratic unions and factory representatives.

The GM executive has thrown down the gauntlet. It is determined to establish a society in which social security and democratic rights have no place. There can be no compromise on this issue. Workers have to advance their own, alternative social programme, based on solidarity, social progress and equality, in place of egoism, profit and the destruction of past social gains. They must adopt a political perspective that places the needs of the working population before the drive for profit.

Despite the justified anger and outrage workers feel over the demands of the company executive, it is necessary that they retain a clear head and look reality in the face.

The widespread talk from union bureaucrats of “management errors” is nothing but cowardly prattle designed to promote the notion that there are more effective, efficient and humane ways of organising the so-called “free market” system. These are the very same people who propose their own “alternative savings programme.”

This sort of rhetoric is aimed at veiling the deeper causes of the developing social catastrophe.

The decision by GM has its roots in the intensification of competition on a world scale that now assumes extreme forms in the auto industry. For some time, auto manufacturers have been shifting facilities to eastern Europe—in particular, Poland—to take advantage of the cheap but skilled labour force in these countries.

At the beginning of this year, the German Economic Institute in Cologne published a paper with the title “The Eastward Expansion of the European Union from the Standpoint of Adam Opel, Inc.” The paper states that the expansion of the EU into eastern Europe on May 1 was a propitious occurrence for the auto industry as a whole, and Opel, in particular.

Immediately after the collapse of the Berlin Wall 15 years ago, Opel began its orientation “towards the East.” In the autumn of 1992, a “new, thoroughly modern and efficient factory” was opened in the town Eisenach in the eastern German state of Thuringia. Already at that time, the company used low wages and high productivity in the east of Germany to put pressure on workers at its plants in the west of the country.

“Our most important step in 1996 in the region of middle and eastern Europe was the decision to build a new works in Poland (Gleiwitz/Schlesien),” the text reads. With regard to production methods and efficiency, Gleiwitz is “almost a copy of the plant in Eisenach,” with production costs somewhat more favourable. “The figures speak for

themselves: in Germany, a working hour costs on average 31 euros (gross labour costs), in France, about 21 euros, and just 80 kilometres eastwards of the German capital, across the border in Poland, just 5 euros.”

However, the exploitation rates available in Gleiwitz do not represent the highest possible level. For some time, the auto industry has been seeking to extend its influence into the rapidly growing Chinese and Asian markets, where even the poverty-level wages paid in Gleiwitz are no longer competitive. In their wake, the giant auto concerns leave behind an industrial wasteland of mass unemployment, ruined infrastructure and social decay.

Until now, Eisenach has been celebrated as one of the “industrial beacons of the east,” and Opel and its sister industries have extended their influence over the region. Nevertheless, a recent report declares that “every second supplier is currently planning a transfer to Eastern Europe or China” (Ernst & Young Study on the Auto Industry). Under these conditions, any concessions by workers represent a further step towards social catastrophe.

Employers received the most important lever for blackmailing workers from Germany’s Social Democratic-led government. The so-called Hartz laws, and, in particular, the latest version, Hartz IV, have destroyed every form of social security and created conditions in which workers earning a reasonable wage today can be plunged into poverty after a year of unemployment. Only when the unemployed have used up all their savings and are demonstrably “needy” can they apply for the state pittance known as “unemployment pay II.”

The big concerns—and not just GM—are counting on using the fear of unemployment and resulting impoverishment to force workers to accept unprecedented cuts in wages and social conditions. A large banner visible at the gates of the occupied Opel works on Sunday read, “Either We Strike or Hartz IV,” making clear the connection between the attack on jobs and the government’s so-called “reforms.”

The unions have played a key role in stifling protests against the Hartz laws and facilitating the implementation of “reforms” in the jobs market. Many of the union bureaucrats are employed in leading positions in the SPD, and for years have been intimately involved in measures that have accelerated social decay in Germany. They have repeatedly declared that compromises and concessions are the only way to ward off the worst-case scenario. Today, workers confront the tragic consequences of their policies. Continual concessions by the unions are inexorably turning the worst-case scenario into reality.

The task confronting workers is to completely break with the old trade union and social democratic organisations. Workers should make clear their mistrust of the negotiations commission supported by the unions, and reject in advance their conclusions. Only those who reject the dictates of company management and are prepared to unconditionally defend the interests of workers at every GM factory should represent the workforce.

The working class as a whole confronts the task of adopting a new political orientation and constructing a new party. The bankruptcy of the perspective of the unions and social democracy is visible for all to see.

In the past, more has been said and written over the merits of social harmony and the role of social reforms in Germany than anywhere else. Laws and constitutions stressed “the social responsibilities bound up with property ownership” and the necessity of collaboration between workers and capital as “social partners.”

After the Second World War and fascist dictatorship, the resolution of social divisions was made the principal task of official policy, and even found its way into the wording of the constitution of the Federal Republic.

In the late 1950s, Opel was regarded as a symbol for West German economic recovery and rising living standards. In 1962, Opel opened its factory in Bochum, providing employment for thousands whose jobs were threatened by the decline of the region’s coal and steel industries. The plant was celebrated as proof of the “effective structural reform of the

Ruhr region.”

With the collapse of East Germany, the reunification of west and east was described as a “triumph of the free market economy” and a demonstration that capitalism was the superior system because it combined freedom and democracy with rising living standards.

In fact, this date represented a turning point. The globalisation of production and finance had removed the basis for all national reform programmes—first and foremost, the economic autarky embodied in the Stalinist program of “socialism in one country.”

This is also the source of the grotesque transformation of the SPD and the trade unions. Their adherence to capitalist economic relations and the nation-state has made them direct accomplices of the employers.

Opel workers should exploit the fact that they work for a company whose American workers have undertaken their own bitter struggles. German workers must draw the lessons from these struggles. There has been no lack of readiness to fight, nor any lack of militancy and courage on the part of US auto workers. Not only have they carried out protest actions and strikes, they have closed down production at a number of factories for weeks at a time.

In the summer of 1998, GM workers in the city of Flint, Michigan, struck for a total of eight weeks. But under conditions in which the American unions allied themselves with the Democratic Party of President Clinton and sought to arrive at a deal with the company, it was possible to wear out and betray the workers’ struggle, despite their militancy.

The consequences for workers in Detroit and the surrounding area were disastrous. Today many plants in the area have been closed. In those factories where production still takes place, wages have not kept pace with inflation and working conditions have deteriorated. Holidays, breaks and worker’s health and safety have been undermined. Many laid-off workers were forced to sell their homes and found themselves up to their necks in debt and driven to accept low-paid casual labour to survive.

Now, GM is seeking to impose such American conditions in Europe. Whoever wants to know where such a course leads and what subordination to the laws of the market really means should examine the reports of day-to-day life in the devastated areas of Detroit and many other major cities in the US.

Rarely has the gulf been so great between the potential for social improvement, embodied in the development of technology and increased productivity, and the destructive way in which this potential is employed. Instead of utilising the possibilities opened up by modern technology for a rational social development in the interests of all, the ruling elite uses its private ownership of the means of production for its own unfettered enrichment, while terrorising the rest of society.

The declaration of Karl Marx, that the private ownership of the means of production is incompatible with the international character of the productive forces, is more relevant today than ever before. Only through the international unification of the working class on a socialist basis is it possible to bring global concerns under social control.

While the trade union bureaucracy seeks to use the European Day of Action to let off steam and prepare the way for talks with management, workers must use this opportunity to establish international links between the various plants and undertake a discussion of a socialist perspective.

The most important instrument to facilitate such a political and organisational reorientation amongst workers is the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS). It publishes in more than 10 languages and is the basis for gathering together all those committed to building a new international workers party.

There is no easy path in the struggle to rebuff the onslaught of GM and other major companies, but the WSWS represents the core of a movement to establish a qualitatively new stage in the political development of the working class all over the world.



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