

Germany: union, works committee stifle Opel strike in Bochum

Andreas Kunstmann
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For six days, workers at General Motors' Opel plant in Bochum, Germany, withstood a concerted campaign by political leaders, the media and their own unions and struck in protest against planned mass redundancies. Finally, on October 20, they gave way and decided to return to work. Of 6,400 votes cast by the Bochum workers, 4,600 were in favour of a return to work and 1,700 were for continuing the work action.

The decision to return to work was made at a mass meeting of the workforce organised by the engineering union IG Metall and union officials from the joint union-management works committee at the Opel plant. The undemocratic methods and bureaucratic tricks employed at the meeting by union and works committee officials were even more flagrant than the treacherous tactics they had adopted previously to strangle the strike.

The strike began as an initiative of rank-and-file workers and was carried out against the wishes of their union, IG Metall. Nevertheless, none of the 8,000 workers at the plant were allowed to address the meeting. Nor was any discussion allowed of the issues at stake.

The only people allowed to speak were three high-ranking functionaries: the chairman of the factory works committee, Dietmar Hahn; his deputy, Rainer Einkenkel; and a long-time official for Bochum IG Metall, Ludger Hinse. All three called for an immediate end to the strike and a return to work. At the same time, they said they would take into account their "responsibility" to the workers. The only issue, they insisted, was whether or not to resume working. No other issues were up for discussion.

The podium was guarded by factory security personnel, to protect the three bureaucrats and enforce their ban on any serious discussion by preventing

workers from reaching the microphone. The union officials' remarks lasted barely 20 minutes. The following two hours were consumed by the vote and an announcement of the result.

For days, the workers had been pressured by national and local government figures, Social Democratic Party (SPD) leaders, the IG Metall and their own works committee, who claimed in chorus that the strike was endangering talks between the union and General Motors. As they entered the mass meeting last Wednesday, the workers were presented with a printed ballot sheet that contained the following loaded question: "Should the works committee continue talks with the company executive and work be resumed?"

Supporters of the strike were thus cast by the works committee as opponents of any talks—precisely the line taken by management against the strikers. At a press conference following the meeting, works committee Chairman Hahn was obliged to say it was the union, not management, that formulated the ballot question.

In the face of the concerted campaign against the strike, a large proportion of those attending the meeting anticipated a likely end to the walkout. Most workers were clear that a continuation of the strike would mean a confrontation not only with the employers, but also with the union. But the proceedings at the meeting exceeded their worst expectations.

Uli Schreyer has been a member of the shop stewards committee since 1987. He has worked in the factory since 1983, and currently works in the assembly plant on the night shift. He expressed his anger over the actions of IG Metall and the works committee.

"I have never before experienced such a meeting," he said. "Not only were we required to show our factory passes as we went inside, our faces were compared with the photos on the passes, and our pockets were

searched. On entry, every colleague was presented with a ballot form. This was all sold as broad democracy. But then, the only people allowed to speak were the works committee chairman, his deputy, and the full-time IG Metall official from Bochum.

“When workers sought to speak, the democracy came to an end. Factory security guards ringed the podium and prevented workers from getting to the microphone. Normally, microphones are positioned on the floor at such meetings, so that workers can participate in the discussion. This time, however, the only microphones were on the platform.

“None of the factory workers was able to speak, although we were told the day before that there would be a broad discussion at the meeting. The meeting hall is designed for such a discussion.

“What, then, was the purpose of the meeting? I could have just handed in my ballot paper. Only opponents of the strike were allowed to speak—the works committee and the union.

“The offer they presented is not really an offer. They told us we have to be more competitive. How this was to be done they did not say, and were not prepared to discuss. General Motors was more open in making its demands.

“From the start, the unions and the works committee sought to strangle the strike action, and enormous pressure was applied to its spokesmen.”

Asked about the mood at the meeting, Schreyer said: “There were various reactions. When colleagues saw the wording of the ballot paper, they were terribly disappointed. One just sat there and wept. There was considerable tension amongst the work force, the feeling that we have to do everything ourselves. We receive support from the population at large, which has donated food. But the unions and works committee are working against us.

“The threats of redundancy are bound up with the government’s Hartz IV measures and the situation at Karstadt, Siemens and DaimlerChrysler. Nevertheless, irrespective of how today’s decision turns out, the workforce emerges as a winner. We gave them what for, and we can resume our action at any time. The union no longer takes into account what is happening in the workforce.”

He continued: “There is a split between the union and the works committee on the one side and the workers

on the other. The gulf exists objectively and has only deepened as a result of their behaviour. High-ranking union functionaries, for example, have given interviews to the media in front of the factory, but neglected to speak to workers at the gate or inside the factory. And IG Metall could have supported the action, but didn’t—either with money or food.”

Andreas Felder, 45, is also a member of the shop stewards committee. In 2002, he stood as a candidate in elections for the works committee, representing an opposition group in the plant called “Opposition Without Boundaries.” He demanded the resignation of the works committee:

“The works committee chairman and the works committee executive formulated the ballot paper. We, the workforce, are disappointed over this. What took place was illegitimate.

“A ‘no’ under these conditions would mean that the work force was not prepared to sanction any talks. We have said very clearly that we are ready to take part in negotiations, and only sought to decide whether we should restart work or continue our information meeting [the term used by the striking workers to ward off legal reprisals]. Some colleagues were only clear about the content of what was being asked after the meeting was over. A works committee chairman who carries out something this undemocratic must resign.”



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