

# Why is IG Metall sabotaging the struggle at Opel?

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Workers have seldom experienced such hostility from the unions and works committees as they did last Tuesday at demonstrations held as part of a European-wide day of action against mass redundancies announced by General Motors' European subsidiaries.

Speaking in Rüsselsheim, Germany, the chairman of the Opel joint works committee, Klaus Franz, attacked workers striking in Bochum and accused them of egoism. The spontaneous strike at the Bochum plant, he said, represented a breach of solidarity because the European works committees had decided that "we should only act together" and, in the first instance, engage in negotiations with the company. There should be no repetition, he maintained, of the situation in Flint, Michigan, in 1998, when a "senseless" struggle by the workers led to big losses for the company. That strike, he declared, had caused "lasting" damage to GM shares.

While those taking part in Tuesday's protest carried banners reading, "Defend All Jobs at All Locations," Franz said, "I warn against the illusion that we will be spared the ordeal of job losses, or that the whole thing can be resolved merely with the loss of a few hundred jobs." GM had been losing money for the past five years, he added.

Having offered the company extensive concessions, Franz told the protesting workers: "We were and are prepared to find a solution via dialogue." He said workers had to be prepared to make sacrifices "for the future of our children," as long as income reductions did not exceed 10 percent.

In Bochum, none of the striking workers were allowed to speak at the Tuesday rally, although many workers had come from other companies to express solidarity and hear from the strikers. Instead, IG Metall functionaries and the works committee joined with church representatives to appeal for an end to the strike.

After the late shift at Bochum refused to resume working and demanded a ballot of the entire workforce, the works committee and IG Metall organised a bureaucratic manoeuvre that was remarkable even by the usual union standards. Although an "open discussion" had been agreed, the only people allowed to speak at the general assembly of the workforce held last Wednesday were works committee members and union functionaries, who stopped at nothing in their efforts to intimidate the workforce. Both the podium and the microphone were cordoned off by factory security guards.

The ballot paper read as follows: "Should the works committee continue talks with the company executive and work be restarted?" This meant that those in favour of continuing the work stoppage were required at the same time to agree to a halt to all negotiations. Even under these conditions, one third of the work force voted for a continuation of the strike.

This is not the first time that the works committee and IG Metall have sabotaged a strike and stabbed the workers in the back. In most cases, however, this took place towards the end of a confrontation, when, often after weeks of conflict, the unions agreed to a sellout. The fact that the confrontation with IG Metall and the majority of the works committee took place at the very start of the conflict demonstrates how profoundly things have changed.

The announcement by the GM executive of massive cuts and plans to eliminate 12,000 jobs in Europe inaugurates a new round of attacks against the working class—not just in Germany and Europe, but worldwide.

Only days before workers in Bochum were coerced to go back to work, the company announced the sacking of 900 of the 5,500 workers employed at the Pontiac utility vehicle assembly plant near Detroit. In January, GM plans to do away with an entire shift at the factory. GM justified the move on the grounds of financial difficulties and unfavourable market forecasts for the next year.

In fact, demand for the vehicles produced at the Pontiac plant has risen considerably. The company is ruthlessly using its international position to play off one factory against the other and force the workforce to concede to new rounds of concessions. It exploits its ability to shift production to Poland, or even to China, where even Poland's rock-bottom wage rates of 5 euro are regarded as "too high."

GM is not the only major company to act in this way. Global players based in Germany, such as Siemens, DaimlerChrysler and Volkswagen, have undertaken similar moves. Everywhere, workforces are played off against one another and blackmailed into making concessions with the threat that production will be moved. The vicious circle of concessions and job losses has no end.

Neither the Social Democratic Party (SPD), nor the trade unions, nor the works committees have any alternative to offer. Their perspective is rooted in the ideology of "social partnership"—the reconciliation of the interests of capital and those of the working class. Even in the 1960s and 1970s, when they were in a position to negotiate improvements, they continually worked in the interests of big business. "One cannot kill the cow that produces the milk," was a widespread trade union saying at the time.

Now, every works committee and union spokesperson routinely declares he "understands the problems of the company." Under conditions of globalisation, however, such consideration for the interests of the company leads directly to catastrophe for the workers. It means that the unions "can be blackmailed to the point of child labour," as a member of a Bochum works committee put it some years ago.

Shareholders have been making huge sums and using their wealth

for private and political ends. GM is one of the most important sources of funds for the campaign to reelect George W. Bush. The current White House chief of staff, Andrew Card, was a long-time lobbyist in the service of GM before he joined the leading circles around President Bush in the autumn of 2000.

At the same time, the incomes of top managers have swelled to fantastic proportions. Against this background, the unions and works committees stare spellbound at negative company balance sheets and then preach the necessity of sacrifice.

On the very same day the Bochum strike came to an end, the works committee and factory management signed a joint declaration that reads: “Both sides pursue the aim of making the factories at Rüsselsheim and Bochum sufficiently competitive to be retained as auto works beyond the year 2010.” The real meaning of this agreement became clear the next day. The night shift was done away with at the Rüsselsheim plant and large-scale cuts announced at the factory’s development department.

The works committees and the union functionaries are firmly anchored in the conceptions of co-determination (Mitbestimmung) and class collaboration. They are neither willing nor able to undertake any other course. The cold-blooded manner in which they stifled the strike in Bochum makes clear that that they will resort in future to factory security guards and the police if they regard “social partnership” to be in danger. For years, they have sat alongside management and raked in a share of the profits. Now, they regard their main task as securing peace and order.

It is worth considering the careers of some of these bureaucrats. Works committee chairman Klaus Franz is a particularly obnoxious example of this species. Up to the present, he remains on good terms with German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer (Green Party). They know one another from the 1970s, when they were active in radical and anarchist circles in Frankfurt, alongside men like the banker’s son and, later, City Treasurer Tom Koenig, and the current European Parliament deputy Daniel Cohn-Bendit (Green Party).

In the mid-1970s, Franz began work at Opel in the paint shop, and gradually climbed the bureaucratic ladder, becoming a member of the works committee in the 1980s. Today, he has a seat on the company board as deputy chairman, and, as he himself concedes, has been responsible for a succession of contracts aimed at “securing the factory,” which involved drastic cuts in wages and benefits. The redevelopment programme “Olympia” bears the imprint of his work, according to the conservative *Die Welt* newspaper, which went on to praise him as a competent joint-manager who enjoys great respect from the company management.

Last year, he played an important role in the sellout of the engineering workers’ strike that took place in the east of Germany. After failing subsequently to get a top job in the IG Metall leadership after some posts came up for grabs, he was regarded as a candidate for a top position in Opel.

The lesson of the strike at Bochum is clear. It is impossible to fight company management without breaking with the works committee and IG Metall. The working class needs a fundamental new orientation. It must reconstitute itself—both politically and organisationally.

The contradiction between big business interests and those of the working class can neither be reconciled nor resolved on the basis of compromises. This means that jobs and social gains can be defended only on the basis of a socialist programme, which unites workers across national boundaries. It is necessary to prepare for a drawn-out

political conflict. To develop its answer to the bankruptcy of social democracy and its programme of class conciliation, the working class must turn to a socialist perspective.

At the heart of a socialist programme is the international unification of the working class. It is not simply a problem of this or that factory. The assault being launched by big capital threatens the working class and all of society worldwide—in both the underdeveloped countries and the developed industrial countries.

Communication and links between different factories can no longer be left to the trade unions and works committees, which, behind their talk of solidarity, seek to play one factory off against the other.

An international strategy must be directly connected to a socialist perspective. The attacks launched by the GM executive—similar to those of Siemens, DaimlerChrysler, Volkswagen and Karstadt—make clear that the profit drive of the big companies and banks is no longer compatible with the fundamental needs and interests of the population. It is these needs and interests that must be prioritised.

All major companies must be subordinated to broad social and democratic control. The private ownership of the means of production must end when it runs counter to the interests of society as a whole.

Genuine democratic control must also be developed inside the factories. Workers should oppose the secrecy of the talks carried out by the works committees and unions with management, and reject in advance the results of such talks.

Only those should be allowed to represent the workforce who are prepared to stand up to the dictates of the company and unconditionally defend the interests of all workers at all factory locations.

The workers must be continually informed about all talks carried out at every level. They must reject the “vow of silence” written into German industrial law. All company books and plans affecting the work force must be made public.

What is at issue is a political struggle, requiring the construction of a new party. The most important tool for the building of a new international socialist party is the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS). It connects the struggle inside the factories with important developments worldwide, and prepares a new stage in the political development of the working class.

We urge Opel workers to read and participate in the work of the WSWS. Make contact with the editorial board and become informed of important developments. Attend WSWS readers’ meetings that will be organised by the Socialist Equality Party.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**