

GM workers hold European-wide day of action against job cuts

Our reporters

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Some 50,000 auto workers took part Tuesday in protests against plans to cut 12,000 jobs at General Motors' European subsidiaries. Those participating included workers from Opel, Vauxhall and Saab plants at a total of 13 different locations— from Trollhättan in Sweden to Azambuja in Portugal.

At the Ellesmere Port Vauxhall plant in Britain, workers took part in a one-hour consultation meeting and sent messages of solidarity to GM employees in Germany. More than 400 jobs are set to be shed in Britain, with 340 to go at the Ellesmere Port plant and 94 at the van factory in Luton.

The largest protests were in Germany, where 10,000 face the sack at GM's Opel subsidiary. The demonstrations were attended by workers, family members and friends, but also by pensioners and young people. However, the hopes of workers for a general mobilisation to defend jobs at all GM locations contrasted starkly with the attitude of trade union officials, whose speeches underscored their readiness to offer more concessions to the company.

The protest by Opel workers in Bochum was one of the largest demonstrations held in the city for many years. Alongside approximately 10,000 auto workers from the three Opel plants in Bochum were thousands of workers from the Thyssen Krupp steel plant, Ruhrkohle AG and other factories in the Ruhr. Nearly 15,000 marched from the factory gate to Bochum city center, where they were met by thousands more protesters to hear the closing speeches. There were twice as many protestors as had been anticipated by the IG Metall union and the European Metalworkers Trade Union Federation.

Many Bochum residents and workers from the Bogestra urban transport enterprise joined the protest. There were also banners expressing the solidarity of small traders and self-employed people, such as: "If Opel Bochum Dies, the Whole District Will Die."

Alongside the trade union banners were many placards opposing the Social Democratic Party (SPD)-Green Party government's labour "reforms" and attacks on the welfare system, known as "Hartz IV". The brass players of the Bochum Symphony Orchestra performed for the demonstrators, and in the evening there was a screening of Michael Moore's film *Roger & Me*, depicting the disastrous effects of GM plant closures in the American town of Flint, Michigan.

The union officials, however, went out of their way to disassociate themselves from the spontaneous strike that had broken out at the Bochum complex after GM announced the job cuts last week. The purpose of the day of action in the eyes of the union bureaucracy was to keep workers calm, and enable the union and company to carry out negotiations on the retrenchment plans behind closed doors.

From the very beginning, the IG Metall refused to support the strike. IG Metall leader Ludger Hinse said he was sick of hearing "all the talk about wildcat strikes." The unions, he declared, "want to keep things orderly here."

Opel workers were confronted with demands from their union

representatives to resume working. As if speaking in unison, Dietmar Hahn, the chairman of the Bochum Opel Betriebsrat (joint labour-management works committee), Klaus Hemmerling of the European Metalworkers Trade Union Federation, and Detlef Wetzel of IG Metall in North Rhine Westphalia stressed that it was better to negotiate than to embark on a course of confrontation, and that the workers "should stay calm and build great cars again."

The hailed as a "success" the fact that the company was ready to negotiate with the unions, and told the workers that "regardless of the outcome of the negotiations," they could "return to work with their heads held high."

The workers allowed Bishop Franz Grawe, the representative of the Evangelical church, to speak and give "spiritual support," but when he joined in demanding that the workers end their resistance, he received a chorus of whistles and boos. Sensing the hostility of the workers, local SPD leaders such as Harald Schartau, chairman of the SPD in North Rhine Westphalia, and North Rhine Westphalian Minister for Social Affairs Birgit Fischer did not attempt to address the crowd.

The negotiations between the unions and the company have already produced initial results that are contrary to the interests of the workers. Although it was agreed that there would be no immediate closures, and that compulsory redundancies should be avoided, the unions have agreed to "socially acceptable personnel adjustments."

As could be inferred from their speeches at the demonstration, the unions have accepted the company line that the factories are not competitive. The workers are now to pay the price of making Opel "viable for the future."

Workers are very conscious of what this means. Some former Nokia communications workers, who had been promised job protection by the unions, subsequently lost their jobs. They spoke and were applauded when they declared that union proposals were a "fraud, which should not be accepted".

One of these workers warned that the unions' position meant accepting massive wage cuts. "Why should we accept what the union bosses are proposing, playing off one location against another? German workers are told they are more expensive than workers in South Africa, and in South Africa they say the Germans are much more productive and do not strike as much."

News leaked out that the leader of the strike at Opel Bochum was about to be sacked by management. But there was no reference to this by any of the union speakers. It was left to a worker at an open microphone to express the widespread mood within the work force: "It is an insult that the leader of the strike is going to be dismissed. We should go to the barricades and support him. It should not be allowed, because every person has the right to express himself politically." There was a unanimous demand that the strikers not face any reprisals.

In Bochum, WSWs reporters spoke with two Opel workers. Klaus Hamm, 41, has been employed for 14 years as a welder and lives in the

neighbouring city of Gelsenkirchen.

WSWS: "What do you know about GM's plans in your department?"

Hamm: "On Thursday, we learned that our department is to be closed and the work assigned to outside firms. The jobs would thus disappear. Some jobs might remain for three years."

WSWS: "What would this mean for you and your family?"

Hamm: "The first consequence would be that we would have to sell our house. My children have already asked what will happen now. That is why they are also here. It would ruin our lives if I lost my job. But even if I kept my job, if I had to accept a wage cut of 30 percent, the result would be the same. Our lives would be ruined."

"We have to ensure that our interests are represented, and we do not allow ourselves to be divided. In the final analysis, it is we, the workforce, who decide whether we will start working again, and what should happen next. It is in our hands, and we should vote on it. I think we all have the same interests."

WSWS: "The unions spoke of ending the strike and going back to work with your heads held high. Workers and employers should not fight against each other, they said. What do you think of this?"

Hamm: "As I said, we should decide on it ourselves."

WSWS: "What is your opinion of the unions and the Betriebsrat?"

Hamm: "Members of the Betriebsrat still represent our interests, but one hears little from the unions. I find that a little weak. They are supposed to be representing our interests. But I've been waiting a long time to see that happen—the unions representing our interests and not acting against us."

Hamm's colleague, Karl-Heinz Wittmann, 44, works in the same department. He has 25 years at Opel.

WSWS: "What do you think of the call by SPD politicians like federal Labour Minister Wolfgang Clement for you to resume work and end the strike?"

Wittmann: "In every interview, Clement says we should go back to work. He claims to understand our situation, but he certainly does not! He assumes, like many, that Opel is making a loss. But this is simply not correct. The losses Opel makes are because GM in Detroit is setting a target for profits, and we are a little below these expectations at present. And this is the deficit we have. In reality, we make profits, but not at the rate that is prescribed by GM. In Zurich [Opel's European headquarters], they try to compensate for this by chucking people out. It can't be right that we are to shed blood for the shareholders' profits."

WSWS: "What consequences do you fear if you lose your job?"

Wittmann: "I fear the descent into unemployment. Then I am one of the 4.5 million unemployed. That is the figure in the media. But in reality, there are more unemployed. And at 44, where I am to find a new job? It looks bad."

"The spiral of unemployment keeps turning. If 4,000 people lose their jobs here in Bochum, then for every one at Opel it will hit two or three jobs in the auto supply industry. And there will be jobs lost in retail trade. It is a downward spiral. Where will it end? I would have no more chances on the jobs market. What would become of my family, the three children and my wife? Perhaps I'll end up in debt up to my ears."

WSWS: "What do you think about the policies of the unions and Betriebsrat?"

Wittmann: "Not much. They just whine. And I am very distrustful regarding the negotiations. I know from recent experience with local companies, it was always a rotten compromise that was negotiated. For me, the negotiations being conducted by the unions and Betriebsrat are not a perspective. The so-called 'socially compatible dismantling of jobs' is not an alternative, because my children also need jobs. Every job that is axed is lost to the region as a whole. Retail trade suffers, everybody suffers."

WSWS: "What is the mood among your colleagues?"

Wittmann: "The mood among my colleagues is good. They know that

we must see this thing through, until we have a reliable guarantee up to 2010 and beyond. And that we must watch out that the Betriebsrat does not make a rotten compromise and decide things over our heads. We all know that here."

WSWS: "Have you agreed not to accept any decisions by the Betriebsrat that go against the interests of the workforce?"

Wittmann: "Right. We will vote on whether we accept it or not. Not the Betriebsrat, they won't do that."

Thousands of Opel workers and their families protested in Rüsselsheim, near Frankfurt-Main, in front of the new "Adam Opel House." According to the unions, there were 20,000 protesters; police put the number at 12,000. Most worked at the main plant in Rüsselsheim, but delegations also travelled from Eisenach in the east of the country and from the Opel test track in Dudenhofen, and office staff from the company insurance fund participated as well. Others supporting the demonstration included school pupils and young people who had organised their own demonstration last week.

The protesters carried banners, handmade signs and T-shirts reading "Opel Should Stay" and "Keep Production at Opel Rüsselsheim & Saab Trollhättan." The Eisenach delegation brought a banner reading "Back to Slavery? Not With Us! Against Social Robbery and Extortion." Children carried placards saying "Our Fathers Want to Keep their Jobs." Alluding to the spontaneous strike undertaken by workers at Opel Bochum, which the union dubbed an "information meeting", some workers wrote on their banners "Hold More Information Meetings! Let's Act, Not Make Axles."

Workers from other factories in the region also came, including Merck, Mercedes Benz, and Teves, as well as city workers from Rüsselsheim itself. Teves workers carried a banner reading "Today It is You, Tomorrow It is Us; Exporting Jobs is Killing Work; the Lust for Profits Destroys Jobs!"

The applause for the speakers was subdued, mainly coming from the front rows where SPD politicians and the Rüsselsheim mayor, as well as local union bigwigs, were standing. Most of the workers present were more sceptical and cautious in their response to what was being said.

Klaus Franz, who chairs the all-Opel Betriebsrat, assumed the pose of superior advocate for the Opel brand, and expressed indignation at the rude "American methods" of GM management. "No manager has ever taken such liberties with his own brand as have the bosses in Detroit and Zurich," he proclaimed. He called on management to recognise that "Opel has roots in the whole population."

Franz left no doubt about the readiness of the union leadership to participate in the jobs massacre, saying, "I warn against any illusion that staff cuts will pass us by...or that it will involve cutting just a few hundred jobs." GM has been making losses for five years, he said. "We were and are ready to look for a solution through dialogue." We are also ready to make a sacrifice "for the future of our children," as long as this means no more than a 10 percent cut in incomes, he proclaimed.

He opposed the strike action taken in Bochum, and went on to attack American GM workers who had launched an eight-week strike in 1998 against the closure of their plant in Flint, saying "It wasn't rhetoric, when we warned that we shouldn't let another situation occur like 1998 in Flint, when a senseless labour dispute led to big losses. This strike did lasting damage to the [GM] share price."

Udo Löwenbrück, Betriebsrat chair at Opel Rüsselsheim, criticised the "mistakes" of the American management. He accused GM bosses of "having no imagination," as opposed to the "reasonable solutions" favoured by the German Betriebsrat.

Günther Lorenz, leader of the IG Metall union in Darmstadt, made clear that the new Opel plant in Rüsselsheim had been paid for by cuts in workers' wages, and dubbed this successful trade unionism. His outline of the union's goals in its negotiations with management sounded more like a threat to the workers than a pledge to defend them. "What has happened

at Daimler and Karstadt applies to GM and Opel,” he said.

As is well known, both Daimler and Karstadt squeezed substantial concessions out of the work force, in return for worthless promises to maintain operations at specific locations.

In contrast to the platform speakers, many workers supported the spontaneous strike action of their colleagues in Bochum. The wife of one Opel worker, who had taken a day’s vacation in order to support the demonstration, told a WSWS reporter, “Many here think the resistance shown by Bochum was a good thing. There are those, however, who are speculating that it is Bochum that will be hit first, when it comes to losing jobs. That is bad. I think it’s good that they went on strike, because one cannot just accept everything that’s dished out.”

She said the mood in the factory was sour. You have to justify everything, she noted. “For example, my husband was off sick for one day a year or two ago. Just one day’s sickness in 20 years! But even so, he was hauled before the boss.”

An Opel worker told the WSWS, “They developed this new factory in Rüsselsheim with our money—it was supposed to be the most modern plant in the world, with just-in-time production.” Now the plant is operating at only 53 percent capacity and is going to be closed down, he said bitterly.

Manfred, who has worked for 27 years at Opel Rüsselsheim, commented: “For 10 years we have accepted less money, and 6 years ago an agreement was made to supposedly secure our production location, for which we also made concessions. For example, nationally agreed wage increases were not paid.

“It is getting much more difficult to manage on our wages, while our standard of living is sinking. Our net wage has remained about the same, but prices are constantly rising.

“My party was always the SPD,” Manfred said finally, “and I never thought that my political opinions would change. But I did not even bother to vote in the European elections.”



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