Following strike in Germany, GM fires Opel workers

Wolfgang Weber, Dietmar Henning
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Only days after a seven-day strike at the Opel works in Bochum, Germany, management sacked two workers, one of whom was a member of the factory works committee. The victimisations were clearly aimed at intimidating the entire workforce and discouraging any further resistance to massive job cuts planned by General Motors at Opel and its other European subsidiaries.

Turan Ersin, a works committee member employed at Bochum Works No. 2, and another worker employed in the assembly plant received dismissal notices last week, just a few days before management and the works committee were due to arrive at an agreement sanctioning the elimination of jobs in Bochum.

According to Andreas Graf Praschma, an Opel spokesman, management is accusing the two men of pressuring and threatening co-workers on the night shift to induce them to go on strike. These are serious breaches of contractual obligations, the company maintains.

The two sacked workers have rejected the charges. At its own meeting held October 25, the factory works committee agreed unanimously to oppose the sackings. According to German industrial law, this makes the sackings illegal, and the company must go through an industrial tribunal to carry them through.

Had the works committee refused to reject the firings, it is very likely the company would have been confronted with renewed spontaneous strikes. There would certainly have been a petition campaign by the work force to demand the removal of the works committee and the election of a new one—as had occurred eight years previously.

During the unofficial strike—called against GM's plans to eliminate thousands of jobs at its Opel plants in Germany—the Bochum workers were confronted with open hostility and sabotage from the majority on the works committee and from the union, IG Metall. Not only did the union and its factory representatives systematically work to undermine the workers' struggle, they opened the way for the company to carry out victimisations as part of an offensive against the work force.

Following every struggle by Bochum workers over the last three decades—whether or not the union supported the struggles—the union and the works committee have reached a deal with management resulting in sackings or other punitive measures against those involved in strike action. This occurred, for example, following a strike at Opel in 2000.

Although the press had run reports last month that management was planning the immediate sacking of strike leaders, the works committee and union did not stipulate, as a condition for a return to work, that no workers be victimised. This was an unmistakable invitation to management to lash out against militant workers. A few were to be singled out and used as examples to demonstrate what happens to those who oppose the policies of the union and seek to resist the company.

The works committee and the union have refused to mobilise the entire workforce in Bochum, and have made no effort to rally workers at other General Motors factories in Europe and America against the sacking of the two Bochum workers.

This is the culmination of manoeuvres by the union and works committee aimed at breaking the recent strike. The strike was initiated on October 14, a Thursday, by a handful of workers and shop stewards, and immediately won the support of virtually the entire workforce. The families of workers at the Bochum factory and most of the local population expressed their solidarity with the strikers. Hundreds of local people blocked the gates of the plant and donated money and food to the strikers.

On the sixth day of the strike, as solidarity actions broke out at GM plants across Europe, 15,000 people demonstrated in the centre of Bochum in support of the 10,000 striking workers. Politicians from the governing Social Democratic Party (SPD), whose anti-welfare policies (Hartz IV) had provided big business with a tool for intimidating the work force, were jeered by those taking part in the rally.

The works committee and its chairman, Dietmar Hahn (SPD), together with Rainer Einenkel and Lothar Marquardt (both former members of the German Communist Party), were taken aback by this development. Unable to gain immediate control of the situation, they initially kept in the background.

The union refused to give out strike pay and made no effort to back the strikers with food or other forms of support. Tempers rose in the works committee when the strikers refused to give way and continued their barricade of the factory gates over the weekend—with increasing support from the population of the entire Ruhr region.

On Monday, October 18, between 10 and 12 members of the works committee walked through the three Bochum Opel factories and attempted to persuade workers to return to work. They carried an email from the company executive and the joint works committee which read: "Both sides, i.e., the Opel executive and the works committee, share the same aim of making the sites at Rüsselsheim and Bochum sufficiently competitive that they can be

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retained as auto plants beyond 2010. This also applies to the plant at Kaiserslautern."

The workers told the works committee members that the email was "rubbish." It did not have a signature and was entirely non-committal. Thus, the works committee's effort to trick the workers into returning to work failed dismally.

The majority on the works committee grew increasingly angry and hostile toward the organisers and spokesmen of the strike. One worker reported that committee members had called the strike leaders "communist pigs."

The chairman of the joint works committee, Klaus Franz, attacked the Bochum workers and accused them of egoism. Citing a strike six years ago at a GM plant in Flint, Michigan, he said such "senseless strikes" served only to do "lasting damage" to GM shares.

On Tuesday, October 19, the fifth day of the strike, members of the works committee once again marched through the biggest of the Bochum plants and demanded that, following a "European Day of Action," the workers go back to work the same afternoon.

Once again, the workers failed to respond. Returning to the factory after participating in the European Day of Action protests, some 90 percent of the workers at works 1 and 2 voted by a show of hands to continue the strike.

The works committee then declared that only a secret vote by the entire work force could make a decision to continue the strike. It organised a mass meeting for the following day, Wednesday, October 20.

This line of action was agreed unanimously by the works committee, i.e., those voting in favour included members of the group *Gegenwehr ohne Grenzen (GOG)*, which presents itself as an opposition tendency inside the committee.

The only people allowed to speak at the October 20 mass meeting were the chairman of the works committee, Dietmar Hahn; his deputy, Rainer Einenkel; and the long-time local union boss, Ludger Hinse. No discussion was allowed at the meeting—indeed, no floor microphones were set up in the assembly hall. Company security guards were given the job of protecting the podium and the microphones up front, to ensure that no ordinary workers were able to speak.

The previous evening, a small group of works committee members formulated the wording on the ballot to be employed to break the strike. >From its onset, the declared aim of the strike was to insist that an official agreement not to shut down factories or implement mass redundancies be included in negotiations between the works committee and the company executive. But the works committee worded the ballot paper to imply that the strike was directed against any negotiations, and that talks could begin only after the end of the strike action.

"Should the works committee continue talks with the company executive and work be restarted?" was the only question on the ballot form, which required a "yes" or "no" answer.

Despite these manoeuvres, a third of the 8,000 workers in the hall voted to continue the strike, demonstrating the extent of opposition to the works committee and the union bureaucracy.

This is why the company has resorted to sackings in an attempt to break the resistance of the work force and impose its plans.

To wage a successful struggle against job cuts and attacks on wages, it is necessary to draw the lessons of these experiences:

* No trust should be given to the union and works committee!

* The union functionaries and the majority of works committee members stand on the other side of the barricades. They are anchored in the concepts of co-determination and class collaboration. They are not representatives of the work force, but instead operate as agents of company management.

* Unconditional defence of the sacked Bochum workers!

* This is the prerequisite for an effective struggle to defend the jobs and wages of all workers!

* Mobilise the workers at all General Motors sites! Utilise the *World Socialist Web Site* to this end. Send letters and reports from your factories and work places to the editorial board of the WSWS.

* The WSWS is a means to establish contact with fellow workers in Poland, Sweden, Belgium and the US.

Demand the immediate withdrawal of the sackings and the end of all other punitive actions against workers who took part in the action of October 14-20.

Send protest letters opposing the sacking of Turan Ersin and his colleague to:

Management of the Opel Works, Bochum, Adam Opel AG
Opelring 1
44803 Bochum
and
Hans H. Demant
Executive Chairman
Adam Opel AG
Friedrich-Lutzmann-Ring
65423 Rüsselsheim

Send copies of protest letters to:

Betriebsart der Opel-Werke Bochum Adam Opel AG
Opelring 1
44803 Bochum
and
The Editorial Board of the World Socialist Web Site

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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