

Sacked German Opel worker: “Dismissals are aimed at intimidating the work force”

Interview with Turhan Ersin

Andreas Kunstmann, Dietmar Henning
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Shortly after the end of the recent seven-day strike at the Opel factory in Bochum, Germany, management fired two workers, one of whom was Turhan Ersin, a member of the works committee. The strike, launched October 14 in protest against the announcement by Opel's parent company General Motors of mass layoffs at its European plants, was not sanctioned by the union, IG Metall, which worked from the outset to undermine and quash the workers' action. In contrast to every other strike that has occurred in Germany in recent decades, in the Bochum walkout no agreement was made between the union, the works committee and management prohibiting the subsequent dismissal or reprimand of striking workers.

This gave Opel management at Bochum a free hand to act against spokesmen for the strikers. Since the firing of the two workers, a third has been sacked.

Because the Bochum works committee unanimously rejected the sackings of Turhan Ersin and his colleague on October 28, management decided to apply for the enforcement of the firings and sent a notice to the arbitration commission on November 5.

Ersin has been a spokesman for young workers at the Opel plant since 1988. He became a candidate member of the works committee in 1998 and a full member in 2002.

Ersin spoke recently to Andreas Kunstmann and Dietmar Henning from the World Socialist Web Site.

WSWS: Precisely what are you accused of?

Ersin: I was alleged to have verbally attacked and used force against colleagues. I was not accused of physical attacks. As far as I know, one foreman and two other workers have made these charges. However, I don't want to publicly name them.

We were on the night shift in Factory I. Luckily, I was not alone. There were around 150 other workers with me. It was there that I announced with a megaphone the number of workers Opel wanted to sack. The number was given to us by the chairman of the works committee, Dietmar Hahn, a couple of hours earlier during a meeting of the works committee.

A worker then stood in front of me and accused me of lying. I asked him, “Who are you?” because he wasn't wearing overalls and I did not know who he was. He said, “I am foreman so and so.” I answered: “When there is no workforce, there will be no foremen. Are you aware of that?” He said, “I don't let myself be told crap from the works committee.” I then told him: “This is no BS. I am a member of the works committee. When people have to go, you'll be one of them. You are as young as me.”

The foreman apparently took it as a threat. I neither attacked nor offended him, nor was I impertinent. He continuously accused me, however, of lying. Luckily, 150 others were there, many of whom were witness to this argument.

Apart from that, there was an incident in Factory II. That was a couple of days later. In Factory II, I helped man the information stall. We were there for nearly 24 hours every day for seven days. It wasn't just me. All my other colleagues were there too. It was amazing. We received support and solidarity from all sides. Even children came up to us.

At the information stall, it was raised that the machine servicemen were still working. The workers asked what work had to be done. I am responsible for this area of work. I told them that it wasn't the entire maintenance group working, just the colleagues A, B and C. I said: “Listen, everyone has the right to work. When those workers believe that they must work, then they work. We leave them in peace.”

Now I am accused of naming these three workers and thereby placing pressure on non-striking workers. No one so much as laid a finger on these workers. In the application that Opel gave to the court, a huge fuss is being made about naming names.

WSWS: Are there other workers, besides yourself and the two others, who have been sacked without notice?

Ersin: Jürgen Rosenthal was given three warnings. I found the allegations against him laughable. The supposed incidents occurred on October 8. However, it was only later, after the several-day-long informational strike, that he received the warnings. The implication is therefore plain to see. The aim of the sackings and the warnings given to Rosenthal is to intimidate the workforce.

I do not know of other cases.

WSWS: The shop stewards committee of IG Metall is collecting signatures against the dismissals. What has been the response to this?

Ersin: Very big. The collection of signatures is still proceeding. I know that the workers are behind me. In Factories II and III, for which I was the works committee representative, they are standing as one behind me, because they believe me.

WSWS: How was it possible that, before the end of the strike, no agreement was reached with the company that management would not initiate action against any workers?

Ersin: I ask myself the same question. Dismissals were previously always given with notice. Normally, agreements were reached to prohibit instant dismissals. You will have to ask this question of other people. Immediately after the mass meeting where it was decided to return to work, the workers went back on the job. The agreement would have to have been made before this meeting. We did not discuss this in the works committee. We have a works committee leadership, and they should have considered this earlier.

WSWS: How do you view the end of the strike?

Ersin: We have always said that the workforce must decide. Everyone yielded to the vote. There was a lot of rubbish surrounding the voting card. It was rephrased during the course of the night before the vote, even though the wording of the voting card had been unanimously decided previously. The agreed question was this: "Are you for an end to the information stand? Yes/No." Nothing more and nothing less. The following day, we just fell over when we saw the voting card. It read: "Should the works committee continue talks with management and work be resumed?"

WSWS: How was the mass meeting able to decide on an end to the strike without any discussion?

Ersin: The idea came from Factories II and III. We discussed it in the works committee. The hall had to be hired at one day's notice and could be used only for a couple of hours. We concluded that there wouldn't be enough time for discussion. Because we had already decided the question that was to be placed on the voting card, I did not think it was necessary to talk about it at the meeting. It was only because the text was already defined the way it was that we agreed to hold the mass meeting without discussion.

WSWS: What has to be done to defend you and the two other workers?

Ersin: Within the works committee I basically say that they should concentrate on the second colleague, who is not in the works committee. He's just a normal worker. He possibly said one thing or another that he shouldn't have. However, it is not about that. He didn't attack anyone, he didn't damage anything, nothing. In my view, the works committee has to refuse any kind of overtime until his dismissal is revoked. As a member of the works committee, I have more rights than he does. Opel has to fight to throw me out of the company,

whereas he has to fight to be allowed to stay in. The fact that the works committee rejected his sacking doesn't change anything. I find it sad that nothing more is being done to place pressure on the company and to defend him.

WSWS: We have heard that overtime is being worked every weekend. Does this have anything to do with your strike?

Ersin: No, not directly. Actually, work is regularly conducted on Saturdays—in the past as well as in future.

WSWS: Is contact being made with other Opel factories, for example, in Poland or Belgium?

Ersin: Unfortunately, at the moment everyone is looking after his own backyard. In Rüsselsheim and Kaiserslautern [the two other Opel factory locations in Germany], they undertake some sort of solidarity action only in their breaks and then start working again. We have to rely on ourselves alone. We can't say that because workers in other locations go on strike, we should too.

We have to act together and fight united against the huge firm of General Motors. An IG Metall adage says: "Only united are we strong." However, in recent times this has been practised less, and therefore every factory is fighting for itself.

The *World Socialist Web Site* calls on Opel employees and workers of every country to demand the sackings be overruled and all other reprisals against workers who participated in the strike at Bochum be overturned. Send letters of protest to:

Management of the Opel-Werke Bochum, Adam Opel AG
Opelring 1
44803 Bochum
Germany

and

Hans H. Demant
Chairman of the Executive Committee
Adam Opel AG
Friedrich-Lutzmann-Ring
65423 Rüsselsheim
Germany

Please send copies of your letters to:

Betriebsrat der Opel-Werke Bochum Adam Opel AG
Opelring 1
44803 Bochum
Germany

as well as to the WSWS Editorial Board at editor@wsws.org.



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