

A special report from Poland

Part 2: the Opel factory in Gliwice

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WSWS reporters travelled to Poland late last year and filed a two-part series. The first article, "Social misery in Silesia," was posted on February 3. The second part, an on-the-spot report from the Opel factory in Gliwice, is published below.

When General Motors announced in November of last year restructuring plans for its European operations, nearly every factory was affected. The factory in Gliwice in the southern Polish state of Slaskie, however, was left untouched by the job cuts. A major factor affecting this decision was the production costs per employee. In Gliwice, labour costs are a mere 15.6 percent of those in the Opel factory in Bochum, Germany. Workers at the Polish plant receive on average 2,800 zloty per month (approximately 700 euros). With such wages, most workers cannot even come close to affording the cars they produce every day.

Since the collapse of the East European Stalinist states in 1989, Slaskie has experienced an unprecedented social regression. Under the old regime, it was the heart of the Polish mining and steel industry. The miners were a relatively privileged layer in society, receiving higher wages and better benefits. However, since 1989—and especially since Poland's push for entry into the European Union—scores of mines and factories have been shut down or restructured, resulting in mass layoffs. The official unemployment rate in Slaskie is currently 16.7 percent.

The social situation confronting the unemployed is a catastrophe. The small amount of unemployment benefits are only paid out for a maximum of one year. Many workers are not paid at all. To keep their heads above water, scores of former miners have resorted to digging for coal with their bare hands. In rubbish dumps, one can witness entire families searching for scrap metal and other objects of value. Many struggle to get by earning only a few zloty through illegal employment.

Against this backdrop, the Opel factory in Gliwice looks like a spaceship from another planet. Driving from the centre of town to the factory along the city's perimeter, one passes rows of old prefabricated concrete apartments housing

workers employed in one of the most modern factories in Europe. Construction of the plant was completed in 1998 and employs almost 2,000 workers. It cost 500 million euros to build, making it one of the biggest foreign investments in Poland.

To convince General Motors to choose Gliwice from more than a hundred other production locations, the city guaranteed the company numerous concessions. Opel does not have to pay any taxes for 10 years and for the following 10 years, just 50 percent of what it normally would have to pay. In addition, the city paid for road and tram access to the factory, as well as for the provision of energy and water supplies and access to the local port.

The official level of unemployment in Gliwice, however, remains at 14 percent; in January 2001, it was 11.4 percent. The general population has hardly seen any benefit from the investment. In the year 2000 alone, the city closed one childcare centre, four pre-schools, two schools and the cancer centre.

General Motors is taking advantage of the adversity facing the Slaskie population. Due to prevailing social conditions, people depend on the auto giant for their jobs and are forced to accept many cuts and retrenchments. Rafa, who works in the factory's assembly line, told the WWS: "I think the unions in Poland have no power, no rights. Whatever the managers say is carried out."

"For the workers that come from Slaskie, the work here is like a godsend. People are happy that they work for Opel. This is how reality looks for us," explained Slawomir Ciebia, a representative from Solidarity, the trade union with a decades-long tradition in Poland. Ciebia is 40 years old and, together with Karol Rybinski, leads the union's work in the factory. Their full-time positions are financed by GM.

The union is entitled to these two positions according to Polish industrial relations law, as Solidarity has more than 600 members in the firm. According to Ciebia and Rybinski, they undertake "typical union work." They intervene in conflicts between management and workers,

advise workers, and discuss wages and working conditions with management. Up until now they have—“with luck”—not had to organise collective action; there have only been sharp discussions. They regard the fact that wages are higher at Opel than at other Polish factories as appropriate compensation for the work they carry out.

At the same time, both of the union representatives are very conscious of the limitations of their work. Two years ago, as production of the old Astra model was wound up and GM decided to cut 350 jobs at Gliwice, Solidarity could not even squeeze out a single month's wage as redundancy payment for these workers, let alone prevent the job losses themselves. In the end, the redundant workers received just 2,450 zloty (€600).

According to a survey, 57 percent of all Solidarity members do not feel adequately represented. Ciebiera explained this by saying people expect too much from the union. For Ciebiera, too many workers thought that wages would rapidly increase to the same level as in western Europe when—by his reasoning—they should be pleased if they reached 4, 5 or perhaps 10 percent of that level. In addition, the government was constantly working against employees. “The current government has taken a lot away from workers. It is not enough that wage increases are too low, they also have to cut workers rights.” He was unable to see any alternative on the Polish political landscape.

In any event, Ciebiera views the possibilities for union work in the age of globalisation as very restricted. Although GM now invests in Gliwice, management could decide in a couple of years to switch production to Ukraine or China, thereby threatening the jobs in Poland. In an effort to illustrate his point, Ciebiera used a two-metre-long table, which represented all the different courses of action available to the company. He placed a coffee mug close to one end of the table. The large section to the left of the mug represented the options that management has; the other couple of centimetres to the right of the mug were what the union had left to work with.

“There is the example of Canada,” explained Ciebiera. “They’ve got tougher unions there, tougher than the IG Metall union in Germany. Karol had contact with union activists in Canada. They came to Poland once and said that they eat the employers for breakfast. And what did this bring them? They won their demands for higher wages. But then, after a year, the company closed down. What is the point?” According to this line of thinking, the union should only demand what management agrees to: “Everything lies in the hands of the employer.”

For Ciebiera, union work is more about being the point of call for workers. Union representatives should inform workers about the situation at work, planned cuts, etc., and

put in a good word for them with management.

The Solidarity representative had to admit, however, that such a union perspective in the end worked against the employees. Asked about what he thought about the recent strikes in Bochum and the undemocratic and hostile policies of IG Metall towards workers, Ciebiera was initially at a loss for words. After a time, he said slowly and carefully, “That is a difficult question. From my point of view, it could also happen here. It’s really a strange situation in the world and in Europe.”

Ciebiera and Rybinski could not see any way out. Time and again, they referred to the Volkswagen factory in Poznan, where management allowed the union a lot more room for manoeuvre. In their own words, considering the reliance of the union on management, another perspective was necessary. However, they were only able to articulate that opposition to the dictates of the employers must be organised on an international level. “It is high time for such unity [of the unions]. I am prepared to accept a central leadership in Europe. A central leadership. That is what it should look like.”

To provide a comfortable life for everyone, one had to fight on an international level for good working conditions and satisfactory wages. “Even if you’re only thinking about your own interests, we should also consider that people in the poorer countries should have better living standards,” remarked Ciebiera. This, however, would require international cooperation: “If everyone would strike together, then yes. But will China strike? Will India strike? Will the others strike? They would not strike. And as long as this international understanding doesn’t exist, we have to work differently here and demand help from the government, from the employers and from those that have the cash.”

Both union representatives lacked any sort of political perspective. Following their experiences with the various Polish governments over the years, they have severed their links with politics. “No union should be allowed to have a party that sits in government. This doesn’t work anywhere in Europe because politicians have other aims,” explained Ciebiera. He saw no possibility for a new workers’ party: “I am against searching for something new, because the new soon goes the same way as the old and everything stays the same. When they have the power, then workers will be left on the sidelines, in spite of everything.”



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