

Opel strike ends in Poland as GM cuts more jobs in Belgium

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At the end of May, General Motors Europe (GME) revealed that it will cut significantly more jobs at its Opel factory in Antwerp, Belgium than previously announced, with 1,900 jobs to go this year alone. In addition, 400 temporary positions will not be extended when their contracts expire in July. Half of the present 4,500-strong workforce face the axe.

When the job cuts were originally announced at the end of April, workers went on strike and occupied the factory for two weeks. The cuts were part of GM's plan to end production of the Opel Astra in Antwerp in 2010. The current production of 225,000 vehicles per year is to be reduced to 120,000, concentrating on a Chevrolet and a small off-road model. As a result, one shift is to be eliminated.

General Motors, still the world's biggest carmaker, has 15 production and assembly lines in nine European countries, employing around 60,000 workers. In April the president of GM Europe, Carl-Peter Forster, announced that the Astra would no longer be manufactured in Antwerp. Instead, it would be produced in Bochum, Germany; Gliwice, Poland; Ellesmere, England; and in Trollhättan, Sweden.

The decision was part of a large restructuring of GM's worldwide operations, which seeks to attack the wages and working conditions of the workforce in order to increase the return on investment for GM shareholders. As with other auto manufacturers, GM is intent on increasing productivity in its factories and to shift part of its production to cheap labour countries in Eastern Europe.

In the past months, GM's restructuring has already resulted in more than 30,000 jobs being lost in both its own plants and at its suppliers. In the last six years in Europe, 20,000 jobs have been cut. The latest cost-cutting programme seeks to save the company 450 million euros in personnel costs. From 2010, each vehicle is to be produced in just 15 hours instead of the current 24 hours.

The management at GM is working closely with its "co-managers" in the headquarters of the trade unions and works councils. To this end, the unions founded the so-called European Employee Forum (EEF). It is headed by Klaus Franz, who is the chairman of the works council at the Opel factory in Rüsselsheim, Germany. Franz is not only a functionary in the IG Metall German engineering workers union and chairman of the joint Opel works council—he is also a member of the supervisory board of GM subsidiary Adam Opel AG.

Franz and the European Employee Forum are working on their own cost-cutting proposals for GM. The EEF stated in a press release its intention "to close the estimated financial hole of 290 million euros in order to improve the competitiveness of the factories." "Further reductions in structural costs will also be investigated when GM management provides us with the necessary consolidated data."

In addition, the EEF has taken on the responsibility, together with the local works councils, of isolating any attempt by workers to fight against GM's restructuring and to limit resistance to hollow protests, with the aim of putting an end to them as quickly as possible. This was exactly what happened three years ago when workers occupied the plant at Bochum for one week; last year when the factory in Azambuja, Portugal was closed; and finally one month ago with the end of the occupation in Antwerp.

One of the most despicable aspects of the politics of the works councils and IG Metall union is that they aim to play workers in the different Opel factories within Germany against each other, and indeed workers in Germany against those in other countries.

When GM Europe announced plans to develop and build a successor to the current Astra model, it also stated that only the most productive plants would receive the contracts to build it. The most unprofitable plant would be closed. The chairman of the Bochum works council, Rainer Eienkel, replied to this attempt at extortion by GM at a mass meeting of workers in Essen on 28 January, 2005: "Those that have the best chance of receiving the orders at the end of the decade to build the new model will be those that possess the best cost structures."

As a consequence, Eienkel together with the works councils at other German factories sought precisely to improve these "cost structures," while at the same time insuring that job losses would be accompanied by "appropriate measures." Before workers in Bochum struck in October 2004, the workforce numbered nearly 10,000. Today, only 4,900 remain. The latest cost cuts will mean another 1,700 losing their jobs. If one includes the planned outsourcing measures, only 2,200 workers are to remain in Bochum.

The works councils seeks to justify these constant concessions to management with the tenuous argument of having "secured" and "guaranteed" the production location. This is a fraud. One can already see how this never-ending attack on workers will end. A confrontation between Rainer Eienkel and Klaus Franz has developed as a result of the continually sharper competition between the European plants.

In an exchange of letters between the two union bureaucrats last November, each accused the other of having signed plant-specific contracts, undertaken secret projects, and to have lied and defrauded. Klaus Franz first accused Rainer Eienkel, chairman of the Bochum works council, of claiming during a committee meeting of the EEF that he saw special advantages for Bochum in GM's "Pact for the Future." Eienkel reacted immediately, sending a vitriolic reply to both Franz and IG Metall Chairman Jürgen Peters, in which he accused Franz of participating in a "secret project" for the last several weeks to see whether the Astra could also be produced in the

Rüsselsheim factory.

It was only reluctantly—for fear of losing control over auto workers and with one eye on the occupation at the time of the VW factory in Brussels—that the two declared a temporary truce. Franz sent another letter to Eienkel on November 26, complaining about “the form, method and way in which you are handling this complex situation for IG Metall.”

There are parallels between the current dealings of the Opel works councils with GM Europe and that of the unions during the VW dispute. At the end of 2006, Volkswagen workers occupied the factory in Brussels for seven weeks in order to prevent production of the Golf being withdrawn, half of the jobs being cut, and the factory being earmarked for imminent closure.

The VW workers were systematically isolated and abandoned by the European VW works councils and its chairman, Bernd Osterloh, who is also chairman of the Wolfsburg works council in Germany. In the end, production of the Golf was halted in Brussels and shifted to the Wolfsburg and Mosel plants, because the Wolfsburg works council had previously agreed to an extension of the working week (from 28.8 to 33 hours) with no increase in wages, as well as other concessions.

It is clear that Eienkel and Franz ended their dispute last November in such a way as to ensure that the Opel factory in Antwerp would be gradually wound down. GM estimates that the restructured Antwerp facility will produce 120,000 vehicles per year at most, compared to 224,000 manufactured in 2006.

Opel in Bochum had prepared itself for the November strike. According to a member of the Bochum works council, Jürgen Schwartz, engine bonnets, doors and other pressed components that were produced in Antwerp were stockpiled in Bochum from January 2006 in order to safeguard against a possible strike in Antwerp. This would allow the strike to be run into the ground while at the same time ensuring that production at “their” factory would not be endangered.

The role of the workers councils as specialists of suppressing struggles of workers was also demonstrated recently in Poland On May 31—the same day that the massive job cuts at Antwerp were announced—Klaus Franz travelled to Gliwice to end a strike there at the Opel factory. Significantly, he said he went there not as a representative of the workforce, but as a mediator.

The conflict at Gliwice had been brewing since February, when Polish trade union representatives from Solidarnosc (Solidarity) presented management with a list of 21 demands to improve wages and working conditions in order to improve morale at the plant.

Gliwice has the lowest costs of all the European plants. It was opened in 1998, costing 500 million euros and employing 2,800 workers, and profited from numerous concessions made to it by the city administration. For the first 10 years, Opel does not have to pay any tax whatsoever, and in the subsequent 10 years will only pay half the regular rate.

The working class in this former mining and steel region, which experienced an unparalleled social decline after the collapse of the old Stalinist regime, greeted the new Opel factory with the hope that things would finally now improve. They were, however, disappointed. The investment hardly brought any benefits to the people. In spite of a full order book, wages for workers were frozen at 700 euros (2,700 zloty) per month, while working conditions became increasingly harsh. Younger and more independent workers emigrated to try their luck in Western Europe.

A report on the GM workers blog quoted the following description of the Solidarity representative Miroslaw Rzezniczek from Gliwice:

“Two workers have initiated court proceedings against workplace harassment. One of them could not physically stand it any longer and picked up another job, albeit worse paying, but calmer work. Many experienced workers who helped establish the factory are even leaving. The remaining workers hold them much more dear to their hearts than they do management. It’s only management that are being paid according to European levels.” The report also notes that temporary workers at Opel employed via the Adecco agency have to work even when they are ill and have a fever.

The demands of Solidarity have centred around its call for a 500 zloty (130 euro) monthly wage increase, for which workers have struck several times, most recently on May 29. Eighty-five percent of the workforce participated in the strike, which lasted from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m., taking in an hour from both the morning and afternoon shifts. Klaus Franz came to Poland to participate in negotiations to end the strike. On May 31, workers were given a one-off payment of 2,500 zloty (625 euro). This was celebrated on the web site of the European Employee Forum as a “great success,” even though wages were kept at their existing low level.

In addition, Franz has formed a “negotiation committee for workplace conflicts,” which is to work closely with the EEF in order to bring conflicts under control at an early stage.

The strikes at Gliwice and Antwerp, as well as those by Ford suppliers SLM and Lear in Belgium, VW in Brussels and at Skoda last April in the Czech Republic cities of Mlada Boleslav and Kvasiny, signal a growing resistance of European auto workers against attacks by management against wages and working conditions.

On May 3, thousands of GM workers across Europe came out to protest in a day of action in Antwerp (Belgium); Bochum, Rüsselsheim, Eisenach, Kaiserslautern, Dudenhofen (Germany); Vienna (Austria); Ellesmere Port and Luton (Great Britain); Göteborg, Södertälje and Trollhättan (Sweden); Strasburg (France); Saragossa (Spain); Togliatti (Russia); and Szentgotthardt (Hungary). In Szentgotthardt the protest was apparently the largest since the restoration of capitalism.

The global integration of the auto industry not only makes an international strategy of workers to defend jobs and conditions a burning necessity, it simultaneously raises the possibility of this in the minds of workers. However, this strategy requires a conscious break with the nationalist perspective of the trade unions. Workers must build new, independent organisations that are democratically structured and are bound to defend the interests of workers.



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