

# Opel workers in Germany: “Nobody knows what will happen next”

Our correspondents  
5 December 2008

In 1995, the Opel workforce totalled 45,600. In 2006 this figure had been slashed to 27,600, and it stands at just 25,000 today. The company’s main plant at Rüsselsheim in the state of Hesse employs 18,500, including 7,000 at its International Technical Development Centre (ITEZ).

In 1978 the workforce at Rüsselsheim totalled 50,000. Of these workers, 42,000 had a full contract with social security and pension provisions. Today the total workforce at the plant is 35,000, but only 18,500 have a contract with Opel. This means that the company has not only shed thousands of jobs, but half of the remaining jobs have been filled by either temporary or subcontract workers. The climate in the factory has worsened dramatically in recent years with workers complaining of intensified working conditions and growing stress.

A team from the *World Socialist Web Site* distributed a leaflet at the start of the early morning shift at the Rüsselsheim plant. The leaflet—“Opel works councils and IG Metall propose wage cuts”—dealt with the crisis at Opel and the role of the works council.

Many workers expressed their dissatisfaction and frustration with the situation. “The mood in the factory is oppressive,” one worker told us. “The workforce is left in the dark or only finds out about things through the media. Nobody knows what will happen next.”

A mood of uncertainty prevails everywhere. At plant gate 60 we learned that virtually all the workers on the night shift are employed by outside companies. This means that full contract workers at Opel have been largely replaced by temporary staff earning lower wages and lacking social security provision.

One temporary worker on the nightshift reported that his contract was due to expire on December 15; he had no idea of his future prospects after this date. Another worker declared: “On the whole, our employment with Opel is of a temporary nature. They can virtually get rid of us

tomorrow if they want.” He had no expectations in the trade unions (the main industrial trade union is the IG Metall) or the works council. “They are not prepared to lift a finger for temporary workers,” he said. Workers at a cleaning firm employed at the Opel plant reported that their own company had recently shed 50 jobs on short notice.

## Discontent with the works council

At the midday shift change, the reporting team spoke with a number of Opel workers who aired their dissatisfaction with developments in the plant. Many of them had read the WSWS leaflet and expressed their agreement with it.

“You have explained things as they are,” one worker told the team at gate K48. “That is just the way it is. It is also correct also that we workers can only conduct any resistance when we unite on the basis of an international strategy. But that cannot be done with our works council,” he added. “That won’t work. They enjoy too many privileges here.”



Elli

Elli, a worker in quality control, commented on the current rescue package for Opel put forward by the German government and the role played by the works council chairman, Klaus Franz: “I think it is wrong for the works council to give assurances that we are ready to make sacrifices without even

informing us. We have made enough sacrifices over the years.” She reported that she and her shift mates are doing almost twice the amount of work compared to 10 years ago.

“Everyone thinks about the future,” Elli continued. “We are constantly told we have to do without. We were already making sacrifices when they built the new works, but when it was completed we failed to benefit. We have less in our pockets, are carrying out more work with fewer people, and naturally there is more pressure from above!”

Another worker declared that he was particularly annoyed with the trade union because “it uses our funds to finance the Social Democratic Party without asking us. It is no wonder that people resign from the union.”



Stefan Ripp

Stefan Ripp is a project manager for the tool department and has worked at Opel for 27 years. Recently, however, his confidence in the future of the company has slumped: “Without twitching an eye the government is prepared to free up three-figure billion sums for the banks. But suddenly they hesitate when it comes to the auto companies.”

“If General Motors goes bankrupt in the US, the result will be a world economic crisis,” Stefan added. “It not only concerns the workers at GM; the jobs of numerous suppliers and many other people are involved. From what one hears, 40 percent of the output of the Bosch company, is dependent on GM and when GM goes down, then it will also have repercussions for Chrysler and Ford.”



Siegmund Gomolka

Siegmund Gomolka is employed in the production hall and has worked for Opel since 1989. He had read the WSWs statement on the role of the works council and said he had resigned from the trade union years ago on the basis of the same arguments put forward in the leaflet. “In my opinion the trade unions

do next to nothing for workers,” he said. “It is as you put in the leaflet: They operate with management on the principle—you scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours. In the meantime, they cooperate more closely with management than with workers on the shop floor.”

Siegmund continued, “This was clear from the last pay contract negotiations. We obtained virtually nothing. One has to ask, what was the point of negotiations in the first place? Why were they content with just 2.4 percent? Why did the IG Metall ever agree to this deal? That is the question.

“We are told the union was fighting to save jobs. But jobs continue to be rationalized away on the production lines and nobody gives a damn. The work remains the same, but with ever fewer workers; and then I ask myself, Klaus Franz, what are you actually doing to retain these jobs?”

“Because of all the subcontracting of work,” he added, “it has become so tight now that we have full-time contract workers only on the production line. All secondary areas of work have been taken over by outside firms. There are ever more temporary workers doing the work that was formerly carried out by full-time Opel employees.”

Siegmund reported that this had led to a situation where full contract workers earn €15.20 per hour alongside temporary workers doing the same work for €6.00: “The trade union allows it to happen; it does not represent the temporary worker. I also do not feel represented by the union. How can you allow such a two-tier system to exist in a factory?”



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)**