

The poison of trade union nationalism

28 February 2009

The rallies organised in Germany on Thursday by engineering union IG Metall and the European works councils at the Opel auto company, and covered so attentively by the media, had nothing to do with the defence of jobs. Instead, they were an opportunity for the trade union leadership to propagate its nationalist and protectionist conceptions.

The largest union, IG Metall, has been systematically encouraging such nationalist and Euro-chauvinist sentiments since the announcement by General Motors that it planned to axe 47,000 jobs worldwide, with 26,000 redundancies in Europe.

The attacks on General Motors by German trade union functionaries were directed less against GM management—who move effortlessly between Europe and America, and to whom the German trade union leaders can well relate based on the German model of "social partnership"—than against American GM workers. The union leaders implied that it was the US workers who were responsible for the company's crisis.

Not one of the trade union bureaucrats and works council functionaries who spoke on Thursday raised the fact that General Motors is planning to slash 20,000 jobs in the United States. A number of GM plants are to be closed while wages have already been virtually halved in recent years. Health insurance and pensions for GM workers have also been under attack, and now further massive cuts are being demanded as part of management's plan to "rescue" the company.

The entire trade union apparatus, including its shop stewards and factory delegates, have been mobilised to prevent any joint campaign by GM workers at all plants to defend jobs. The trade union rejects any international struggle to defend jobs, wages and working conditions—including those of tens of thousands of contract workers. They fear that such a struggle could rapidly spread to other branches of industry, public service workers, and the working class as a whole.

Appeals in the past by the trade union bureaucrats for international solidarity and collaboration were invariably abstract and lacking in any real content. Today, however, under conditions where workers confront the same problems all over the world and urgently require a new international strategy, the bureaucrats remain silent.

At the rallies on Thursday, trade union leaders raised the separation of Opel from GM as their central strategy. In this, they are lining up unconditionally with the European-German management of the Opel group. They claim that the German management is better than the American and are demanding that Opel employees make sacrifices to secure the competitiveness of a German or European company.

The claim that the waves of redundancies—and the constant pressure for wage cuts and worsened working conditions—is simply a result "of American mismanagement" has nothing to do with the reality. The situation is not fundamentally different at other German automakers such as Volkswagen, Daimler and BMW. Against a background of the intermeshing of production on an international scale, the conditions of capitalist exploitation become more and more similar around the world.

Savage job cuts have already taken place in Germany. At one time, 40,000 workers were employed at Opel's main German factory at Rüsselsheim. Today, barely 16,000 remain, many of whom are workers on a temporary contract. The company's plant in Bochum, which was constructed in the early 1960s and provided work for redundant miners, once had a workforce of 23,000. Today, that figure stands at around 5,300.

It is telling that the "co-managers" in the works council and trade unions have called upon workers to make concessions on behalf of a company that does not yet exist—i.e., the union's favoured merger of Opel with the British brand Vauxhall. On several occasions Thursday, trade union speakers declared that workers

were prepared to make "further sacrifices."

To soften up workers for such "sacrifices," IG Metall head Berthold Huber and the works council chairman Klaus Franz announced an initiative—also strongly supported by Germany's Left Party and its leader Oskar Lafontaine—for "workers' financial participation." Behind this formulation is an established union manoeuvre aimed at suppressing the class struggle and binding workers as closely as possible to the company. The same demand was formerly termed "the accumulation of assets in the hands of employees," and was bound up with workers taking shares in their own companies.

Under conditions of deepening recession, such financial participation by employees means that workers are not only called upon to support the company through wage cuts and job reductions, but are also expected to invest their savings. Nothing changes with regard to the form of company ownership and profit orientation of the economy, which means workers lose everything when the company finally goes under.

The claim by Klaus Franz that a German or European enterprise is more efficient than the American and international competition must be understood as a threat. The works councils and IG Metall functionaries are determined to stampede Opel workers into an unrestrained race aimed at driving down wages and working conditions.

The consequences of such policies advanced in the name of the national interest are devastating. The jobs and living standards of workers are continually sacrificed in the never-ending competition to attract investment.

At the heart of this nationalist orientation lies close cooperation with the government.

As soon as it became clear that the international economic crisis was having dramatic consequences for the German auto industry, IG Metall and its works councils organised a meeting of European Opel management with government representatives and suggested a sort of truce. The union representatives declared they were ready to implement cuts and savings if the government was prepared to make financial guarantees and state investment available to the ailing enterprise.

It is impossible to defend jobs and workers' rights on

this basis. Workers are not responsible for this crisis and must vigorously oppose all attempts to make them pay for it.

The German government has given billions to banks that have gambled away unimaginable sums and unleashed the worst economic crisis since the 1930s. So far, there has not been a single criminal prosecution of any of the bankers who made their fortunes on the basis of thoroughly unscrupulous investments. Workers who have invested their entire lives on the job stand to lose everything in the wake of the crisis—and nobody is prepared to bail them out. This cannot be tolerated.

The first step must be to defend all jobs and reject any demands for concessions and sacrifices on the part of companies' workforces anywhere in the world. Factory committees should be established independently of the unions to make contact with workers in other factories and organise an international struggle to defend jobs and working conditions.

The defence of jobs must become the starting point for a political offensive aimed at establishing a workers' government. Such a government would nationalise the banks and major corporations, subject them to democratic control and place them at the service of society as a whole. It would divert the billions being donated by the German government—as in the US and elsewhere—into reorganising the economy and creating millions of new jobs.

Such a policy can only be carried out on an international basis and through the closest collaboration of the working class all over the world.

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