German trade union implements wage cuts at Opel

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Last week the German trade union IG Metall (IGM), supported by the local works council, imposed a wage cut for workers at the Opel plant in Bochum. Opel is a European subsidiary of General Motors.

Opel had illegally refused to carry out a pay increase of 2.1 percent that was due to start February 1. Management then appealed to the trade union to ratify the withholding of the raise. IGM immediately signaled its readiness to agree, but was forced to hold a ballot following a storm of protest from its members.

During the vote many workers complained about “inconsistencies” and “manipulations”. According to some workers several hundred IGM members did not receive voting forms and were unable to vote. The counting of the ballot was repeatedly postponed.

Last week, IGM announced a slim “yes” vote, with 1,191 members voting for the pay cut and 961 against. In spite of the narrow victory and reports of voting irregularities, IGM official Oliver Burkhard claimed that “a majority of employees have voted for this contract”.

This is a lie. Of the 5,000 Opel Bochum workers approximately 4,500 are members of the IGM. Of these, only 2,133 participated in the vote, with IGM invalidating an additional 31 ballots. This means that only 26.4 percent of union members voted in favour of the deal. Nearly three-quarters of the union membership expressed their rejection of the pay cut or their disgust with IGM by either voting against the concessions or abstaining from the vote.

Additionally, 2,000 workers employed at the Opel works by other companies could not vote in the election. Thus, support for the contract was quite low, an indication of the shrinking influence of the trade union in the factory.

In the past few weeks the works council did everything it could to put pressure on the workforce to accept the wage cut. They helped develop a climate of insecurity and fear amongst workers over the fate of their jobs, and encouraged the illusion that jobs could be saved through accepting the wage cut.

In a letter sent to workers’ homes together with the voting cards, Burkhard and another leading IGM official, Ulike Kleinebrahm, wrote that the current situation at Opel was “dramatic”. Threateningly they wrote, “The future of the enterprise is acutely endangered. [...] You know very well what is at stake for you and for Bochum”.

Both stated in their letter, “The only solution to permanently secure jobs and a future with Opel”, is an independent Opel Europe concern. To this end the European executive committee is planning “a reduction of personnel expenditure”.

Burkhard and Kleinebrahm make no secret of their support for such a measure. They argue that without wage cuts by workers there will be no Opel, and thus no jobs. There is an expression for such a line of argument: extortion.

After publication of the ballot the trade union declared in a press release, that “IG Metall North-Rhine/Westphalia will sign the contract”. They maintain that the 2.1 percent owed to workers could be treated as an employee contribution towards a so-called “worker financial participation” in the firm. According to the IGM in North Rhine-Westphalia, similar agreements have been enforced at the other German Opel factories in Rüsselsheim, Eisenach and Kaiserslautern.

The 2.1 percent wage increase is “postponed and not waived”, the IGM claims. This is not true. If Opel is broken up—which is likely to be the case—then the

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money is gone. If Opel is taken over then further cuts and substantial job reductions are inevitable.

The vote at Opel Bochum makes two things clear.

First, IGM and the works council are using their entire apparatus to persuade employees to accept a pay cut. And although they were only able to win a small minority of the total workforce, this misnamed “union” went on to support management’s pay proposal.

Second, the more IGM and its functionaries emerge as the executive arm of management, the more opposition will mount against the union’s policy of corporatist collaboration.

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