

Opel rescue plan: German unions offer wage cuts

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26 May 2009

Shortly before a government crisis meeting last Friday to discuss the future of Opel automobiles, the leaders of the company's works council offered to sacrifice €1 billion of its members' wages.

On Thursday, Rainer Eienkel, the head of the works council of the Opel factory in Bochum, told the *Berliner Zeitung*: "We discussed a European-wide co-worker model in co-operation with Opel dealerships." According to Eienkel this model envisages that 50,000 European Opel workers would give up wages in exchange for a share of the company. In addition 4,000 Opel dealers would deposit a total of €500 million in an already agreed rescue fund.

The proposal has the backing of the company's joint works council chairman Klaus Franz. In the *FAZ* newspaper Franz declared his support for this "emergency plan" and said: "If all other plans fail, then the employees and Opel dealers would put forward a joint proposal."

In an interview with *Die Welt*, Franz praised the advantages of the recent takeover bid made by the US-financial investor Ripplewood. "The concept of Ripplewood is absolutely logical and comprehensible," he declared. "The offer must be seriously checked." Franz made his comments although auto experts are united in their view that a takeover by any of three rival bidders—Fiat, Magna or Ripplewood—would result in the loss of between 10,000-18,000 jobs at Opel.

The question must be raised: what gives Franz, Eienkel and the IG-Metall the right to make such an offer on behalf of their members? This "emergency

plan" has not been raised or discussed—never mind voted on—at any of the recent work floor meetings held by Opel's 50,000 European Opel-GM workers. According to Franz, however, his proposal was already being prepared by attorneys and chartered accountants.

If Opel employees were to accept such gigantic wage cuts, involving a sum of €20,000 per worker without the slightest guarantee of secure employment, such a decision would not just have consequences for their bank balances. The political consequences of a so-called "participation in the enterprise" would be even greater. For better or worse, Opel workers would be virtually chaining themselves to the fate of their "own enterprise".

The result would be an unparalleled division between automobile workers. Opel employees would acquire the status of a kind of modern slave and become the rivals of workforces at other automobile producers such as Volkswagen, Daimler and Ford. Joint wage contracts and bargaining procedures would be a thing of the past and the most elementary forms of class solidarity, along with previous social gains, would be seriously undermined.

The Socialist Equality Party, which is participating in the European elections on the basis of a socialist program for the unity of European workers, roundly condemns the "emergency plans" drawn up the Opel work councils and the German IG-Metall engineering union. They should be emphatically rejected by Opel workers.

The end result of this policy of dividing workforces and subordinating workers to management adopted by

the IG Metall work councils can currently be seen in the takeover battle between Volkswagen and Porsche, where the fate of both companies is in the hands of rival clans within the same billionaire family. The struggle between Ferdinand Piëch and Wolfgang Porsche will inevitably cost thousands of workers their jobs, but the most obnoxious role in the whole affair is being played by the head of the Porsche works council Uwe Hück, who also represents the IG Metall as deputy chair of the Porsche supervisory board.

Hück, who is known for his complete loyalty to the head of Porsche, Wendelin Wiedeking, recently organized a demonstration of Porsche workers in Stuttgart with the slogan: “Piëch betrayed us.” Hück’s protest was aimed solely at backing the Porsche chairman against Volkswagen. Wiedeking, who earns over €50 million a year, was held up as the first victim of a successful VW takeover of Porsche.

While the work councils and the IG Metall are striving to prevent any effective joint struggle by workers in Germany, Europe and world-wide, they are lining up behind their respective managements and operating as junior partners.

Their latest proposal for massive wage cuts on behalf of workers in order to “save” their companies will also undoubtedly receive political backing from the German Left Party. While the IG Metall speaks of 25 percent participation for its Opel “co-worker model,” Left Party deputy Bodo Ramelow recently raised his party’s own demand for a “co-worker participation” in endangered companies of up to 49 percent.



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