

# Discussion with Opel worker: “Joint resistance is necessary”

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Just a few days before the start of the summer break, Opel auto workers have been denied their contractual holiday payments. Anger is growing in the company's main German plant in Rüsselsheim and the worker's wrath is directed not only against the management, but also against the company's work councils.

Many workers are enraged that the joint works council agreed to the non-payment of holiday and Christmas benefits, as well as the freezing of contractually agreed wage increases. Instead this money is to be invested into a so-called “Co-worker's equity investment company” (MKBG) headed by the chair of the company's joint German and European works councils, Klaus Franz. Franz is a leading member of the IG Metall engineering union and also vice-chairman of the Opel supervisory board.

The supervisory board of this new finance company is to consist mainly of IG Metall functionaries. In a letter distributed to all Opel employees the union argues that the establishment of an equity investment company with the funds of workers is “the only possibility” for employees in future to exert “influence on business decisions.”

A former IG Metall shop steward told the WSWs editorial board that many workers are very distrustful of the union and annoyed at the fact that everything is decided above their heads. In light of the tense situation in the company, where any dissenting opinion is suppressed by management and the works council, he preferred to remain unidentified. We refer to him as Peter Haupt.

“Nobody asked us workers,” he said and added sarcastically that now all Opel workers are probably shareholders in the new company Opel/Vauxhall

Europe. But, according to Haupt, “We have absolutely no control over the shares which we allegedly possess. We cannot sell them.”

It is not the first time that funds belonging to workers have been frozen. The agreed wage increase of 2.1 percent was frozen in March with the agreement of the works council and put at the disposal of management.

On June 29 an extended meeting of union shop stewards took place at Rüsselsheim, which was also attended by IG Metall members. Based on Peter Haupt's comments this is what took place at the meeting:

The withholding of holiday pay was vigorously criticized in several contributions with a number of workers explaining that they could not afford to sacrifice the money.

Eric Kordes, a young shop steward from the vehicle assembly line, spoke out against the withdrawal and informed the meeting that at the beginning of June he had received a second warning for alleged production errors. He had received his first warning when he had begun to collect signatures among fellow workers protesting the nonpayment of the holiday pay. He lodged a legal complaint against the warning but was not defended by IG Metall. Shortly afterwards he received his second warning.

Kordes told the assembled workers that he was concerned he could be dismissed and used as a scapegoat to intimidate the rest of the workforce. Peter Haupt supports Kordes, but thinks that the latter has underestimated the role played by the trade union and the works councils. “He is acting as if he had a powerful organization behind him in the form of the IG Metall. But when it came down to it he was left in the lurch,” Haupt said. “The works council did not even appear in court on the day of his hearing. Apart from

assisting with his legal costs the IG Metall was not prepared to support and defend him.”

Due to the refusal of the trade union to organize a joint struggle at all of the company's factories many employees are disconcerted by the stream of declarations that state that, given the dire economic situation, drastic economy measures are inevitable. Many workers are intimidated, Peter Haupt reported. “Naturally many colleagues are anxious and their first concern is how to hang on to their own job,” he said.

He was well able to remember what took place at his factory five years ago. A strike by Opel workers in Bochum met with considerable support from the workforce in Rüsselsheim, but the factory's works council refused to actively support the strikers in Bochum. At that time Peter Haupt and many of his colleagues were keen to expand the strike to their own plant and other factories. He explained:

“In common with many others at the factory, I was convinced that the time had finally come in 2004 to strike. We did not understand why we could not strike together with Bochum.”

Since then he has been very critical of the works council. The IG Metall has not taken up the increasing work load for workers and done nothing about it. This is why many have resigned from the union recently. “They say, ‘I do not need the services of a trade union that does not represent me,’” Haupt said. “When the catalog of horrors is implemented anyway, I would rather use my money for something else.” Unlike production workers, the full-time works council members have secure and well paid jobs, he said.

Workers must reckon with increased work loads, lower wages and high job insecurity in the near future. Following a take-over by the Canadian firm Magna—the option favored by the works council—all contractual agreements are up for grabs, and up to 30 percent of production is due to be carried out by contractual labor.

Changes to the production sequences, Haupt explained, will involve the doing away with regular breaks. Until now, in addition to the major breaks, workers have also taken short pauses of 10 minutes every one and a half hours. “This has been important to enable the body to briefly recover from the monotonous production sequence,” he said. “But lately the workload has become so hard that one is completely exhausted at the end of every shift.”

“In future there will no longer be regular breaks, instead workers will be replaced in sequence,” he went on. “When you start work at six and then have to take a break after half an hour it means one could work to midday without a toilet break—that is really hard.”

In regard to subcontracted agency employment, many workers are already employed in that capacity at Rüsselsheim. Already providing temporary workers for Opel Rüsselsheim are the agencies Formel D, Powertrain, Adecco, SDR, Randstad—to name just a few.

The subcontracted workers receive much less money for carrying out the same work as full-time workers. Full-time workers receive 16.50 euros, while those working for the agency Formel D receive just 7.50 euros per hour for doing the same work and without any job security.

For the past two years apprentices have no longer been taken on by the company, but instead farmed out to an agency—usually Adecco or Randstad. Via such agencies apprentices can be re-employed in the factory, but for much lower wages.

All of these changes were made possible by the “Future Contract 2010,” which the works council agreed to in 2005, and which forced workers to accept the severest attacks on wages and working conditions in the post war history of Opel.

Today the investor Magna, which is seeking to take over Opel/Vauxhall, is demanding annual savings totaling \$350 million. This is equivalent to slashing 10,000 jobs in Europe. For the past six weeks the joint works council, and in particular the Rüsselsheim works council, has expressed its support for a take-over by Magna.

Instead of giving way to all the demands made by Magna, it is high time to undertake joint resistance, Peter Haupt, the former shop steward, stressed.



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