

# Who is Klaus Franz?

## The evolution of the Opel union leader

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The most fervent advocate of the takeover bid for Opel—General Motors' European operations—by the Canadian-Austrian auto supplier Magna is the chairman of the Opel works councils, Klaus Franz. This is despite the fact that Magna plans to slash up to 20,000 jobs.

The works council chairman has already offered a series of major concessions and expressed his readiness to implement wage cuts, the cancellation of holiday and Christmas benefits, flexible working times and other measures detrimental to the workforce.

In return, Magna has declared its willingness to allow the works councils (local union organizations) and IG Metall union functionaries to own between 10 and 12 per cent of the company. The works council leadership can hardly wait to take up their new posts as company shareholders. Although there has still been no definite decision in favour of Magna, and GM management in Detroit has expressed its own criticism of the Magna plan, the works councils have already created their own financial holding company.

At a joint works council meeting June 5, Klaus Franz was designated chairman of the board of the new enterprise. Top officials of the works councils at the four German Opel plants were nominated to the company's supervisory board. Opel employees, who are being forced to finance the new holding, will have neither shares nor voting rights within the new company. Despite the fact that the holding firm is designated a "co-worker equity investment company" (MKBG), it provides no benefits for workers.

Franz is a typical representative of a social layer that struck radical poses in the 1970s and subsequently moved sharply to the right.

The best-known representative of this element of ex-leftists is of course Joschka Fischer, who began as a "street fighter" before climbing the ladder to become German foreign minister and vice chancellor. Franz knows Fischer from their time together in the radical group "Revolutionary Struggle," at the beginning of the 1970s in Frankfurt.

Other members of this group who, together with Fischer, became leading members of the Green Party are Daniel Cohn-Bendit and Tom Koenigs. Emulating the Italian left-wing "operaist" [workerist] and "autonomist" groups, the Frankfurt group of anarchists sought to galvanise workers with "revolutionary" actions.

Franz was the son of a drugstore owner in Stuttgart and completed his training as a druggist, before beginning his involvement with radical politics and starting work at the Opel factory in Rüsselsheim in 1975. "Then the Vietnam movement came along, and for us the only issue was the world revolution," Franz told German radio in a long interview this spring ("Where would you be without Opel, Klaus Franz?" March 29, 2009).

In the same interview Franz describes the start of his "revolutionary

factory work" in the workshops of Opel in Rüsselsheim. The workers, however, did not respond to the unserious call for "anti-authoritarian resistance" against their superiors and the factory hierarchy. After a while the work became too arduous for Joschka Fischer and his comrades in "Revolutionary Struggle," and they rapidly quit the Opel assembly lines.

Klaus Franz remained. While the others climbed the political ladder, using the Green Party along the way, Franz began his own long march through the institutions of the trade unions.

In 1981 he became a works council member, and in 1985 was freed from production work in order to concentrate on his union duties. In 2000 he became chairman of the company works council and in 2003 deputy chairman of the supervisory board of Adam Opel AG. In his March 2009 radio interview he stressed how important this climb up the career ladder was for him: "For me, someone from a conservative state [Baden-Württemberg] coming to "red" Hessen at that time, this was a place where somebody from below could climb the ladder and make a career."

Franz did not join a political party, but did appear nevertheless on the Greens' list in elections for the local (Rüsselsheim) municipal authority, where he completed a term in office (1989-94) as a town councillor.

Like many leading Greens today, Franz has made his peace with the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the right-wing elements in economic life. Today he talks professionally with top company directors such as GM Vice President Carl Peter Forster and CEO Fritz Henderson in Detroit, as well as German Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU) and has a good relationship with Roland Koch, the Hessian Prime Minister, also CDU. As he himself admits, he agrees with much of the CDU program and he counts the right-wing party's former labour minister Norbert Blüm as a good friend.

At the start of the 1990s Franz took a university course, as he later explained, to help him assume the chairmanship of the works council. His chosen thesis for his diploma at the college of further education in Frankfurt was the "integration of people with health problems in lean production systems."

### Lean production

This was the period during which the Berlin Wall fell and the Stalinist regime in former East Germany (GDR) collapsed. The former East German Wartburg factory in Eisenach was reintegrated into Opel and revamped as a model modern company. German auto companies

had begun to import production concepts from Japan such as “quality control,” “group work,” “lean production” and “just in time.”

Trade union officials and works councils sold the new methods to the workforce as measures, which “humanised” and “democratised” production. Klaus Franz says today: “We changed the previous situation where a worker painted 645 doors in the course of a day. Today people work in groups and have completely different tasks and responsibilities. It was a form of democratisation of work, and I was one of its sponsors” (radio interview).

The “lean production” system, originally associated with Toyota in particular, had nothing to do with “humanizing” working life. Instead it was aimed at increasing productivity by decentralising production processes into small, autonomous and more flexible groups (teams), with corresponding increases in product quality. It was a reaction by German car companies to increasing pressure from the world market.

For the workers, in the final analysis, it meant a greater workload and additional stress—in particular when combined with the constant reduction of personnel levels.

### The co-manager

During the last ten years Franz increasingly assumed the role of a co-manager at Opel, intent on securing “the survival of the company.” “Earlier there was such a thing, to put it bluntly, as a degree of profit sharing. Today it is ‘pain sharing’ that is the name of the game,” he told a journalist employed by the German unions’ Hans Böckler foundation.

Franz ensured that savings and “necessary” cuts were imposed smoothly at Opel and that protests against them never got out of control.

In 2003 Franz became vice-chairman of the Opel supervisory board. When IG Metall organized a strike for shorter hours in West Germany that same year, he refused to support the strike. When the Opel workforce reacted to the threat of closure in November 2004 with a one-week factory occupation, Franz prevented any solidarity action by workers at the sister plant in Rüsselsheim.

In 2005 Franz concluded a European-wide agreement, which cost 9,000 jobs and cut an entire shift. The current workforce at Rüsselsheim totals 4,000, compared to the 18,500 formerly employed. Increasingly, production has been outsourced and transferred to subcontracted workers, who only earn half as much as a fulltime worker at Opel and lack any security. Even apprentices are referred to temporary agencies after their training.

Last year Franz expressly opposed a socialist perspective and spoke out against the World Socialist Web Site. The newspaper *Freitag* quoted Franz as follows: “Some regard such pragmatism as ‘a capitulation to the demands of the company.’ Whoever acts in such a way as a works council member stabilises the capitalist system, instead ‘of struggling for a reorganisation of society on a socialist basis’ (World Socialist Web Site).”

Klaus Franz concedes: “Yes, I can hear an echo of myself. I talked the same way in 1975 when I started at Opel. People, however, are different than I formerly believed. They wanted a compromise, their own little personal happiness and not the great world revolution.” (*Freitag*, 8 February 2008)

These statements are simply cynical. What has resulted in this

search for a “little personal happiness”? Opel workers are being forced to do without previous benefits—Christmas benefit, holiday pay, agreed pay increases, even work breaks—while all job guarantees, “future contracts” and other such promises have proven to be worthless.

Regardless of clichés about a “little happiness,” workers confront increasingly miserable conditions, while Franz and his cohorts work on their own social ascent by organising the dismantling of jobs and wage cuts. They are in no way different to their corrupt counterparts in the United Auto Workers (UAW) in the US.

### The example of UAW

The UAW agreed that General Motors could close fourteen plants and wipe out tens of thousands of jobs as part of the company’s bankruptcy process while preventing any revolt by workers. The UAW has ensured that workers’ wages are frozen and pledged to refrain from any strike action until 2015. The union then took over the administration of the health care trust (VEBA), which amounts to 17.5 percent of shares at the new GM, and hope to make a healthy profit from the shares in the company.

Franz and the rest of the works councils are keen to follow suit by creating their “own” finance company. It is no coincidence that they seek to use workers’ money in this way for their own advantage, without any vote or democratic procedures.

In order to oppose this, workers need a new strategy: they must break with IG Metall and the works councils and establish independent factory committees. Against the coordinated offensive of management, financial sharks, governments, works councils and union officials, workers must unite in struggle with their international colleagues at Opel and GM—workers throughout America, in Belgium, Spain, Poland, Russia and all over the world. That is the only way to defend jobs and living standards.



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