

Opel workers demonstrate in Antwerp in defence of jobs

Works councils and unions prepare sell-out

Our reporters
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On Wednesday, around 3,500 Opel employees demonstrated in front of the factory gate at the Opel plant in Antwerp, Belgium, in defence of their jobs. According to the plans worked out between Magna and General Motors, the Belgian facility is to be closed at the start of next year.

At present, approximately 54,000 workers are employed at GM's European plants. The Magna concept involves the slashing of 10,952 jobs including 4,116 in Germany (Bochum 2,191, Rüsselsheim 1,427, Kaiserslautern 456, Eisenach 42); 2,517 in Belgium (i.e., the closure of the plant in Antwerp); 2,090 in Spain; 1,373 in Great Britain; and 437 in Poland.

For months, the works councils and trade unions have refused to organise a common fight for the defence of jobs. The protest action September 23 was aimed at providing the unions with an alibi for their lack of activity and at throwing dust in workers' eyes.

Just two dozen works council members and union officials came to Antwerp from the Bochum plant in Germany. In an interview with the *World Socialist Web Site*, the chairman of the Bochum works council, Rainer Eienkel, confirmed that he had not intended to bring a large delegation. "I brought three colleagues." Whoever wanted to participate in the rally had to take holiday leave.

A similarly small delegation came from Opel's main German works in Rüsselsheim, while around 400 attended from the plant in Kaiserslautern. Those taking part from those plants also had to take holiday leave. A handful of works council members attended from other countries with Opel plants.

The trade unions and works councils had openly refused to call for strike action. Even workers in Antwerp were called upon to participate in the rally only between shifts—ensuring unimpaired production at the factory.

The entire meeting was aimed at instilling hopes and

illusions amongst Opel workers—especially those employed in Antwerp.

On Wednesday morning, the works councils of all European Opel locations met to discuss how job cuts could be organised in a manner that channelled opposition into a few protests. Then at noon, works council representatives spoke at the demonstration and stressed that they had arrived at a unanimous decision to reject any plant closures and job cuts. They refrained, however, from explaining how such cuts and closures could be prevented.

Klaus Franz, the joint works council chairman of Opel-Vauxhall in Europe, explained to the assembled workers that alternatives would be found to plant closures. At the same time, he expressly ruled out any alternative to the Magna deal and associated job cuts.

In his speech, Franz made clear that major attacks and cuts were inevitable. "It will not be our fault when this enterprise once again becomes a source of speculation." Workers would make their contribution—in the form of job reductions and wage cuts of "265 million euros annually." The path confronting Opel workers would be stony and hard. But there was no choice. There was no way back to GM. "Liberation from GM will not be cheap," according to Franz. On the contrary, employees "would pay dearly" for this liberation.

Franz refused to comment on the figures cited in the media on planned job cuts. His silence on this issue was repeated at a subsequent press conference by Rudi Kennes, works council chairman in Antwerp, and Armin Schild, IG-Metall delegate from Frankfurt.

Franz and Eienkel refrained from answering questions put by the media and did not appear at the press conference. In their stead, Kennes and Schild sought to present the situation confronting Opel employees and the attacks lying ahead in the best possible light. In so doing, they resorted to

evasions and distortions.

When a WSWS reporter asked about the dimensions of job losses being negotiated by the unions with Magna—in July, Franz had spoken of up to 22,000 job losses—Schild was evasive. He neither contradicted nor confirmed this figure and gave no concrete numbers. At the same time, he stressed that job reductions were inevitable. The final tally of such reductions would only be known after the completion of negotiations.

Schild and Kennes went so far as to declare in front of television cameras that Magna had never announced its intention to close the plant in Antwerp. At the same time, they did not contradict the report by the Opel trust, which declared that production in Antwerp was to be wound down in the next few months (at the beginning of 2010).

Kennes stated that the factory in Antwerp could be saved with the production of a small sports utility vehicle (SUV). GM and Magna plan to build such vehicles in a factory in China. Kennes reacted with indignation to the news that China was to receive the order, although “Antwerp had proved its superiority in competition with the factory in China.” While he declared his solidarity in Europe, Kennes badmouthed China. He rejected the fact that China had received the order, he stressed. This meant the money would go to Asia and “land via a detour in the black hole of Russia.”

Kennes also admitted that in the event of agreement on production of an SUV in Antwerp, many of the current 2,600 jobs at the factory would still be lost.

The limited demand for such cars meant that such a “rescue” of the Antwerp plant would only be short-term—in effect, merely delaying slightly the closure of the factory. Just two years ago, the workforce in the factory totalled 4,500.

Works council leader Kennes also defended previous job reductions, wages cuts and deteriorating working conditions—all in the name of “rescuing Opel.”

When asked by a WSWS reporter how staff would react to the news that savings of €1.6 billion were being prepared behind their backs, Schild responded by declaring that there had been no definite decisions so far. “In the IG Metall, there is a long tradition that members are asked before anything is agreed upon.” In this case, too, union members would be consulted, and Schild even predicted a 90 percent agreement to proposals for cuts.

Another WSWS reporter pointed out that Schild’s statements were incorrect. It is well known that in Rüsselsheim, which is within Schild’s jurisdiction, the elimination of a wage increase and holiday pay had been enforced by the Opel works council without the agreement of the workforce. In reality, these cuts are a component of

the Magna concept and are supported by IG Metall and the works councils.

With bureaucratic arrogance, Schild responded that he was unaware of any written agreement. “I would not know what people could vote about.”

The trade unions and works councils used the demonstration on Wednesday to give their lip service to solidarity with the aim of sabotaging any genuine measures of struggle and creating illusions about the extent of forthcoming job cuts. Many workers with whom WSWS reporters spoke were therefore torn between hopes of survival and fears for the future.

Karl Eigner has worked for nearly 20 years in the maintenance department at the Opel plant in Kaiserslautern. He stated: “After the election to the Bundestag on Sunday we will hear even more about what is to come. Irrespective of whether Magna takes over or not, I anticipate the elimination of approximately half the jobs in Europe.”

Eigner described the situation at the Pfaff sewing machine manufacturer in Kaiserslautern. “They used to have 6,000 workers. Then they reduced jobs step by step. Now just 200 remain.” He fears the same development for the Opel plant in Kaiserslautern. “The plants in Antwerp and Bochum will be closed soon anyway. But before the election, nobody is prepared to spell out the truth.”

Supporters of the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party (PSG) distributed 2,000 leaflets in Dutch, German, English and French. The leaflet contained an Open Letter from PSG chairman Ulrich Rippert to Opel and Vauxhall workers. The letter warns: “The purpose of the deal is to shift the burden of the world economy crisis onto your shoulders. It is part of a worldwide frontal attack on the working population, whose standard of living is to be lowered to the level of the 1930s.

“Opposition to planned dismissals, plant closures and wage cuts must be organised now. If you do not take such measures, you stand to lose everything and your children will be left without a future.

“The biggest obstacles in the way of organising such resistance are the trade unions and works councils.”



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