GM to close Antwerp Opel plant

Our correspondent
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US automaker General Motors has closed down its Opel factory in the Belgian city of Antwerp. Opel boss Nick Reilly announced in Brussels on Thursday that 2,600 workers will lose their jobs in a few months time. “We are planning to end production in summer, I don’t know whether that will be in June or July,” said Reilly.

The closure of the Belgian plant is a prelude to the coming massive workforce reduction in all of the European production plants. At least 8,300 jobs will disappear in total, half of which are jobs in four German Opel factories.

Reilly is at the same time using the Belgian plant closure to bring extreme pressure on the remaining GM workforce. He has delivered an ultimatum demanding from them an annual wage reduction of 265 million euros. If the remaining workers are not prepared to “play their part in streamlining operations,” he has let it to be known that further factories will inevitably have to be shuttered.

The workplace closures in Belgium will have a devastating impact on the country’s industrial economy. With half a million inhabitants, Antwerp is the biggest city in Flanders. The official regional unemployment rate is already 16.7 percent. Opel was the last major industrial plant, and on average an additional three jobs in the associated supply industry depend on each Opel worker. This means the resulting jobs lost will soar to over 10,000. Ten years ago, there were still 6,600 men and women employed at the Opel plant. In the 1980s it was even more—about 12,000.

The assembly lines for GM and Opel have been operating in Belgium since 1925. First they assembled the Chevrolet. Then they built various models like the Manta, Ascona, Kadett and Vectra. Over the last few years, the only car built has been the Opel Astra in various models.

In order to carry through their job-cutting offensive, the directors of General Motors rely on the close cooperation of the IG Metall trade union along with the other European trade union and works council leaders. Up to the last moment, these trade union and works council leaders have been reassuring the workers by fomenting the illusion that the plants would be saved from closure by means of voluntary pay cuts and state subsidies. They have suppressed every attempt to take industrial action, arguing that the latter would prevent jobs from being saved.

After Opel boss Reilly made his closure announcement on Thursday, IG Metall hypocritically expressed its surprise at the decision. Klaus Franz, the chairman of the Opel/Vauxhall European joint works council, and Armin Schild, the authorized representative of IG Metall in Frankfurt, spoke of “a declaration of war on the workers” and called for a protest action in Antwerp to take place this coming Tuesday, January 26.

In fact, the trade unions and works council leaders have lost any shred of credibility due to their conduct in the wind-down of GM's European operations. Their latest exclamations of concern are solely aimed at covering the tracks of their close collaboration and complicity with the GM business leaders. The so-called Viability Plan VI, which anticipates further massive job cuts and worsening conditions, has been known to the works council for a long time and was in part directly drawn up in the works council office by Klaus Franz.

The closure of the Opel plant in Antwerp confirms the warnings made repeatedly by the WSWS of the pernicious role played by the trade unions in Germany and other European countries with Opel-Vauxhall.

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