

The nationalist poison of the trade unions

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On Thursday last week, General Motors in Europe announced its intention to close the Opel plant in Antwerp, Belgium. The head of GM Europe, Nick Reilly, said production will cease in June or July of this year and the factory's remaining 2,600 workers will lose their jobs.

While some German factory councils and trade unions have criticized the decision, the fact remains that the closure of the Antwerp plant was from the very start a component of the strategy worked out by Germany's biggest union—the IG Metall engineering union.

The German chairman of the European joint works councils, Klaus Franz, supported closing the Antwerp plant as part of the takeover bid for Opel by the Austrian-Canadian auto supplier Magna. GM, which is currently 60 percent owned by the US government, adopted the job-cutting plan of the union and then rejected Magna's bid, deciding to retain control of its European operations.

The German and European unions have sought systematically to spread the poison of nationalism among auto workers. They worked to suppress any solidarity action by European auto workers in support of their fellow GM workers in the US when the company announced its plans to close 14 American plants, cut 27,000 jobs and reduce the wages and benefits of those left in the factories. Instead, IG Metall declared that "the Americans were responsible" for the economic plight of Opel, and the union campaigned for the separation of Opel from GM's operations.

Franz and the works council chairmen at German Opel plants worked closely with the German government, which supported the Magna takeover bid for its own geo-strategic reasons.

The Magna plan was based on cooperation with Russia, and would have provided the Russian auto industry with access to GM and Opel technological

know-how. This would have created a useful counterweight for the German government and business interests to the major US auto companies.

IG Metall head Berthold Huber travelled to Moscow to meet with Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and expressed his support for the sale of Opel to Magna and its partner, the Russian Sberbank.

GM (and the US government) decided against the sale of Opel to Magna not least to frustrate the efforts by Russian auto makers to acquire Western technology.

During this entire process of wheeling and dealing with governments in Germany and Russia, the main role of the works councils and the unions was to suppress any joint action by European workers.

The nationalist opportunism of the unions in Germany was matched by the bureaucracies in other countries. In Antwerp, the works council chairman, Rudi Kennes, declared that if any plant were to be closed, it should be the Bochum factory in Germany. In Bochum, the works councils argued for the shutdown of Antwerp.

In Great Britain, the Unite union struck a deal with the country's right-wing Labour government to save British jobs at GM's Vauxhall subsidiary at the expense of workers at Opel plants in continental Europe.

From every country with Opel-Vauxhall factories the message from the unions was the same: "We are more productive and are prepared to offer greater concessions than auto plants in other countries. The others should fall under the axe!"

The European works councils have called for a meeting at the Antwerp plant on Tuesday. Workers should treat this meeting with the contempt it deserves. The union bigwigs and works council leaders are seeking to cover their tracks and conceal the leading role they have played in the downsizing of Opel.

While Klaus Franz is now criticizing GM boss Reilly

in public, the two men have been working together for some time behind closed doors—and Antwerp is only the tip of the iceberg.

Reilly is demanding the axing of 8,300 jobs from the 50,000 Opel-Vauxhall workforce in Europe, including 1,800 redundancies in Bochum. GM also expects massive wage cuts from those European workers retaining their jobs—the total savings of 265 million euros that had been guaranteed by the work councils in their negotiations on behalf of Magna.

The only point worked out by the works council which has to date not been accepted by GM is a plan for a trust, whereby workers “invest” in the form of wage cuts in exchange for a share in Opel’s operations—to be managed and run by the German trade unions. This is nothing other than a scheme for the union executives to personally profit from the destruction of the jobs and living standards of their own members.

In the US, the United Auto Workers union was made the single biggest GM stockholder, after the US government, following bankruptcy proceedings which the UAW supported. The union now owns 17.5 percent of the reorganized company and union executives are rubbing their hands in anticipation of growing rich as the company returns to profitability on the basis of ever greater levels of exploitation of GM workers.

Opel and Vauxhall workers should be warned. In the absence of joint action to prevent the closure of the plant in Antwerp, there will be more layoffs and concessions. The next victims will probably be in Germany.

When he announced the shutdown of the Belgian plant, Reilly warned of further closures should employees fail to contribute “their share to the redevelopment concept.” According to media reports, likely candidates for closure in the near future are the German plants in Bochum and Eisenach.

The German government headed by Christian Democratic Union leader Angela Merkel initially supported the Magna plan, while delaying any firm action during the run-up to last September’s federal elections. Now the gloves are off.

The new government, headed by Merkel in coalition with the Free Democratic Party, is preparing unprecedented attacks on all sections of the working class, including auto workers. It continues to rely on the

unions to implement its class-war program. The government has made clear that it supports the closure of more Opel plants, and the unions have promised to act “responsibly” in the current financial crisis, i.e., to offer even more concessions in the current round of contract bargaining.

The existing unions are a trap for the international working class. Under conditions of the international economic crisis, the unions ally themselves more openly and closely than ever with their respective governments, and use the poison of nationalism to pit workers against each other.

The jobs of workers in any country can be defended only on the basis of a program to defend the jobs of all workers in all countries. The fight for such a program requires that workers repudiate the nationalist and pro-capitalist policies of the unions and works councils and break with these right-wing apparatuses.

New organizations of struggle must be built. Rank-and-file committees should be established in every factory which are independent of the unions and works councils. The first principal of such committees must be the struggle for the international unity of all auto workers on the basis of a socialist perspective.

The defense of jobs must become the starting point for a political offensive aimed at expropriating the major auto concerns and the banks, subordinating them to the democratic control of the working class, and placing them at the disposal of society as a whole.

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