

# Opel/Vauxhall workers need an international strategy

## Statement by the Socialist Equality Parties of the UK and Germany

Socialist Equality parties of the UK and Germany  
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The European head of General Motors, Karl-Friedrich Stracke, will put forward a restructuring plan involving annual savings of \$1 billion (800 million euros) at GM's supervisory board on June 28.

GM is initiating a new round of drastic attacks on wages, working conditions and jobs at its European subsidiaries Opel and Vauxhall. The 50-year-old Opel plant in Bochum (Germany) is likely to close.

Workers who oppose this onslaught are forced to fight on two fronts. Their enemy is not just the company management, but also the trade unions and works councils.

For years management, trade unions and works councils have collaborated to enforce massive cuts. While the unions maintain close international connections, rub shoulders in the European works council and sit on the board of Opel / Vauxhall, they play off one production site against the other in order to get further concessions from the workforce.

Pay cuts, increased flexibility, job losses, etc., are routinely presented as the only way to secure the future of a plant—until the next round of cuts began.

Three years ago Opel closed down its first plant in Amsterdam, with the loss of 2,600 jobs. Shortly before the closure the European works council, which had helped to organise the shut down, held a solidarity demonstration in order to save face.

Now the same pattern is to be employed once again. The British trade union Unite has agreed to drastic concessions at the Vauxhall plant at Ellesmere Port—three instead of two shifts working 51 weeks per year; a four-year pay deal including a two-year pay freeze, making wages cheaper for GM; the use of subcontracted workers making up to 30 percent of the

total workforce.

In return, Opel has pledged to shift production of its best-selling Astra model from the company's principal factory in Rüsselsheim (Germany) and to concentrate it in Ellesmere Port and Gliwice (Poland). The main victim of this process will be the Opel plant in Bochum, which is likely to lose construction of the Zafira model to Rüsselsheim. The closure of Bochum would result in the redundancy of 3,100 Opel workers, of an extra 2,000 employed in subsidiary work in the factory and of 15,000 in supplier companies.

Workers at Ellesmere Port too would be making a big mistake if they regard their jobs as safe. Within the framework of the agreed alliance of Opel / Vauxhall with the French auto group PSA Peugeot Citroen, the two companies plan to save an additional billion dollars per year from 2017 onwards. This means that more plant closures in Europe, including at Peugeot Citroën, are inevitable.

Neither are the jobs of workers at Opel's main plant in Rüsselsheim guaranteed. The union constantly assures them that their plant is of crucial importance because it houses the global development division of GM. But the company plans to share development departments in its new partnership with Peugeot Citroën.

GM's policy of divide and rule is not limited to Europe. The company has leaked rumours about moving production of Chevrolet-branded cars from South Korea to Germany and of its Corsa model from Eisenach (eastern Germany) to Zaragoza (Spain). The Eisenach factory's future would then be entirely dependent on the success of a smaller model to be built from 2013 onwards.

The constant haemorrhaging of jobs is supported by the jingoistic slogans by which local union officials and politicians seek to incite one workforce against another.

The Labour MP for Ellesmere Port, Andrew Miller, praised the two union officials who negotiated the deal with GM. “These two have found common ground between the interests of GM and the interests of the local community,” he said, calling for protectionist measures in the same breath: “As a nation we now need to respond positively to this announcement, especially by making sure that no more public bodies follow the North West police authorities in buying cars with no UK content.”

For his part the Bochum works council chairman Rainer Eienkel insulted British workers at a factory meeting, saying that GM’s decision meant that “Those who supply the crap quality should build the cars.”

Rüsselsheim works council chairman, Dr. Wolfgang Schäfer-Klug, also claimed that “The most modern factory in the Opel / Vauxhall Network, namely Rüsselsheim,” produces at 219 euros less per vehicle than Ellesmere Port and at a better quality.

Schäfer-Klug plays a double game. He is also chairman of Opel’s European works council and deputy chairman of its supervisory board. In these capacities, he is not only informed at an early stage about the plans of GM, but helps to draw them up.

From June 1 Bob King, president of the American United Auto Workers, will assist him in this task. King will take up a seat on the Opel supervisory board. Sponsored by Germany’s IG Metall union, GM lobbied for King’s appointment because of the key role he played in collaborating with the Obama administration in imposing 30,000 job cuts at GM’s operations in the United States, reducing wages for new hires by half and downgrading working conditions.

Schäfer-Klug also maintains close relations with GM supervisory board chairman Stephen J. Girsky. In a joint press statement in January, Girsky and Schäfer-Klug agreed “that Opel has to be profitable—even in times of deteriorating economic conditions.”

Girsky is a key figure in the collusion of management and unions. He was an analyst at the bank Morgan Stanley and worked for GM, before the UAW hired him as a consultant. It was through the billion-dollar

pension trust run by the UAW that he made his way back to the executive of GM.

It is impossible to stop the offensive against wages, jobs and working conditions without opposing the works councils and the trade unions. The downward spiral will accelerate. The initial benchmark is the wages in Poland. Opel workers at Gliwice have a gross income of only €770 per month. The next benchmark is the even lower wages paid in Romania, Bulgaria and China.

The works councils and shop stewards are determined to prevent any resistance to the onslaught by GM. “A strike would be suicidal. We do not want to give Detroit an open goal,” declared Bochum works council chairman Rainer Eienkel. Schäfer-Klug also said that he is opposed to industrial action at Opel.

To defend jobs, wages and social rights, workers at Opel/Vauxhall need an international strategy. They cannot permit their ranks to be divided. They must break with the trade unions and works councils and work closely together with their colleagues in Europe, the US and internationally.

Factory and action committees must be established to organise joint international action involving strikes and the occupation of plants threatened with closure. Such action should not be limited to GM and Peugeot Citroën.

Jobs and living conditions can be defended only on the basis of a political perspective, which focuses on the needs of employees and their families rather than the profit interests of the corporations. What is required is a socialist program.

We call on GM workers and auto workers all over the world to establish contact with the editorial board of the World Socialist Web Site. We will help you organise a global offensive against the attacks levelled against you.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**