German Opel worker: “For nearly 10 years, it’s all been downhill”

Dietmar Henning
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We are driving on a sunny Saturday morning in a typical housing estate for this area, just a stone’s throw away from the Opel plant in Bochum. Many of Opel’s workers live here in beautiful, restored former colliery houses dating back nearly 100 years. Well-kept gardens, clean streets and pavements give the sense of an idealised existence that is long a thing of the past.

If management gets its way, the Opel plant in Bochum will close “in two, rather than four years”. This comes from a man who can look back on a lifetime working for Opel. Gerd Bücker started at Opel in Bochum when he was 20. That was in 1976.

Now he’s out. He is in the transfer company established by the works council and Opel management. “I’m supposedly going to get qualified there”, he says. “But of course that’s nonsense. We are 700 colleagues, all over 50 years old. They are trying, but most aren’t interested in any qualifications. We’re just waiting out till retirement.”

Gerd Bücker is now 56 and can stay for one year in the transfer company. He receives 80 percent of his last net wage. “Then I get two years of unemployment benefits, in theory”, he tells us. Because that is too little to live on, he must use his severance package. “And then I’m 60.” At that point he will get a reduced statutory pension and his occupational pension of €510 a month—after working 36 years for Opel. The occupational pension provisions have long been abolished.

Gerd Bücker does not live in one of the idyllic old colliery houses. He lives in a well-maintained 1960s apartment building on the outskirts of the settlement. At the time the mine was closed in Bochum, the Opel factory was built directly in front of the old pit. This was in 1962, exactly 50 years ago. But no one in Bochum feels like celebrating. Fifty years ago, many miners switched jobs to Opel.

“There was a different mood at that time”, says the former Opel worker. “Whenever a foreman started getting high and mighty, he’d soon get taken down a peg or two.” The old timers had always been proud telling him this.

His father, a miner in Bochum, did not switch to the new Opel plant. He was transferred from one pit to the next for 20 years. Perhaps it was this experience that led Gerd Bücker to finally go. “I now own my own small apartment”, he says. “That will soon be gone with a mini-job.”

What he wants to avoid at all costs: “Hartz IV [welfare] and temporary work.” He thinks both are the greatest evils of the past few years. He knows the temporary employees who worked at Opel. “I felt really sorry for them”, he says. “One of them who worked with me was a skilled worker. He did overtime, he did everything whenever asked. He was really good.” He would have loved to have become a permanent employee at Opel, “But after a year, they just threw him on the street.”

Gerd Bücker does not want to suffer this fate. Ten years ago, he would not even have dreamed that it would get this far. He was training as a petrol station attendant—”which was then a recognised occupation”—but it paid too little to feed his wife and his first of five children; 850 deutsche marks—even in the 1970s it was not enough to feed a family.

He related, “In 1974, Opel sacked workers, then two years later reinstated them. I got a job thanks to my father, who knew the management and the works council representatives from playing football.” That is how it used to be. You would meet at the weekend on the football field, Opel bosses and workers. “Today, you don’t even see the management in the factory,” says Bücker. But earlier: “You signed your contract at the personnel office, then went next door to join the union.”

With regard to the union, he says he is no longer angry; he thinks he has gotten over it. But he vividly remembers that “we were well over 20,000 men at Opel.” “It looked like ants when we went to work.”

“As recently as the 1980s, we were 22,000, today there are only about 3,000,” says Bücker with a mixture of sadness and anger. Many worked on the production line. “Where I worked, in engine manufacture, there were 50 people. In the end, there were just 9.”

The changes began already in the 1990s. The Japanese came to the factory and photographed it all. “The works council representatives told us that they were our enemies, because they could build engines faster and better.” Then came the new engine production. Colleagues reaching retirement were not replaced. But they primarily sent apprentices to the assembly line, “as they needed strong and quick men.”

At the same time, wages declined. “Previously, Opel had paid

well," says Gerd Bücker, "now it pays badly." For 10 years he has received no wage increase, allowances were reduced, and holiday and Christmas bonuses cut. At times the Christmas bonus was even linked to one's sick record, "Last time, I got only 35 percent of my monthly salary as Christmas bonus." Originally, workers received 100 percent.

The works council negotiated the constant cuts in wages and deteriorating working conditions. "Since the 1990s there were these constant cosy links between the works council members and management," says Gerd Bücker. "The union and the works council increasingly lost their influence. It's also understandable. Again and again, they agreed to contracts where we had to make concessions. And the concessions that GM made were not worth the paper on which they were written."

Only one works council member stood up: "Turhan Ersin, he always defended us, he was the only one who opened his mouth. He was always on our side and supported us. But management put him under so much pressure that in 2004 he left Opel due to illness. They finished him off." The WSWS reported on the campaign against Turhan Ersin at the time (see "Following strike in Germany, GM fires Opel workers").

There was always opposition to the works council, "and against Jaszczyk" as Gerd Bücker says. The policies of the late DKP (German Communist Party) member Peter Jaszczyk, who led the works council from 1996 to 2002 in Bochum, are being rewritten retrospectively by some works council members. But the big changes began with him.

"In 2000, the gradual removal of parts of the factory, Caterpillar, power train, etc." Especially at TCM Group, where Opel's apprentices were transferred, his colleagues received only low wages. "They did this specifically to reduce wages."

In 2004, the engine plant was shut; the engines now came from Hungary. Bücker moved to the gearbox plant. "I almost got depression working there", he says. Every morning, he had to walk through his old plant, the shut-down engine plant, to his new job.

"From 2004 it went downhill." The General Motors management had announced in October this year they were cutting 12,000 of 63,000 jobs in Europe, 10,000 in Germany alone. The Opel workers in Bochum took spontaneous strike action against the threat of plant closure; against the will of the IG Metall union and the works council, who did everything in the factory to force the workers back to work. "It was the right decision. Since we were finally all back together and agreed," says Bücker, meaning the workers. The strike was finally strangled "using a dodgy pretext at a staff meeting by the works council."

On the fourth day, when workers still refused to return to work, and demanded a vote of the entire workforce, the works council and IG Metall organised a bureaucratic manoeuvre that is unprecedented even by union standards. At the workforce meeting, only three works council members and union officials spoke, who intimidated the workforce. Workers were refused the right to speak. Microphones were guarded by security staff.

The ballot linked the question of whether work should be resumed to the question: "Should the works council continue negotiations with management?" Those who wanted to continue the strike had to also vote for breaking off all negotiations. Even under these conditions, nearly a third of the workers voted for the continuation of the strike.

Most knew, "Now it's over", says Bücker. Many left with severance pay. "But I was too young, I was only 49, I couldn't just wait to retire."

At the time of this last strike eight years ago, there were still 10,000 workers on the payroll at Opel's Bochum plant. Rainer Einenkel—like Jaszczyk a former DKP member—then became works council chair, a position he still occupies, to enforce the announced job cuts.

Workers were put under pressure, including his son, who had trained as an industrial mechanic at Opel. "My oldest", says Bücker, "was also invited to quit work by the works council." He is unmarried, has no children and is still very young. He would be the first one who would have to go. So he finally decided to quit. "He is now working at ZF as an automotive supplier at Lake Constance and is happy. I am pleased."

Nevertheless, Bücker still gets agitated about the way his son was thrown out. "He was at Opel for almost 10 years before he signed his termination agreement. If he had worked for two or three months longer at Opel, he would have been eligible for a pension." This is how things have gone to wrack and ruin, the father grumbles. "The works council members deliberately didn't inform anyone about this. Many people went through the same experience as my son."

More and more employees went and were replaced by temporary workers. Since early 2005, when Einenkel became works council chair, 7,000 workers have lost their jobs—70 percent of the workforce.

Gerd Bücker is one of them.