

# GM-Opel plant in Germany to be shut down

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The General Motors' Opel factory in the German city of Bochum is to be closed by 2016 at the latest. The factory works council and Opel executive informed staff of the closure at a staff meeting on Monday. It is the first closure of a German auto plant since the Second World War.

On Friday Bochum works council chairman Rainer Einenkel announced that production of any new model at the factory would end by 2016. The plant in Bochum employs just over 3,200 staff directly and more than 1,000 workers in subsidiary companies. The factory currently produces the company's Zafira family auto. Closure of the plant, the main employer in Bochum, will also affect the jobs of thousands of workers in supply industries. Despite the announcement of closure the company has confirmed it plans to go ahead with an open day this coming Saturday to celebrate the 50-year history of the plant.

"2016 ends the production of entire vehicles in Bochum", Opel CEO Thomas Sedran told workers at the staff meeting on Monday. Following his less than one-minute statement Sedran hurriedly left the meeting room by a back entrance. Eyewitnesses report that an official of the factory union, the engineering and metal workers union IG Metall, sought to speak to Sedran before he left. The official was immediately pushed to the ground by security guards and assaulted.

The announcement makes official that which has been known for months to the factory works council and the IG Metall, but deliberately held back from the workforce. The Opel board and the American group's parent General Motors (GM) entered negotiations at the start of this year with the demand for the closure of the Bochum factory. Einenkel, however, has repeatedly claimed that he was not negotiating the closure of the plant.

In fact, the company executive made clear from the beginning that it would not allow its decision on the future of the Bochum plant to be influenced by the works council. Rather, the job of the council was to present, defend and enforce the management strategy. In

negotiations which have now been going on for eight years the Opel board and works council head Einenkel have demoralized the workforce and created the conditions step by step for the complete closure of the factory.

When Einenkel took over as chairman of the works council at the end of 2004 and the start of 2005, the workforce at the Bochum plant totalled over 10,000. In October 2004 workers had been able to prevent further layoffs in a six-day labour dispute carried out largely independently of the works council. GM then submitted a savings plan for the European subsidiary, which provided for the elimination of 12,000 jobs, including up to 10,000 in Germany.

In the following years the works council under Einenkel sought to ensure that the massive job cuts and attendant wage cuts could be implemented without major protests. In the name of "job security" Einenkel also agreed to the closure of the company's Opel plant in Belgium in 2010. Now it is the turn of Bochum.

Einenkel repeatedly used the same tactic. Publicly he declared the readiness of Bochum Opel workers to fight for their jobs, but privately he worked with management behind the scenes to cut jobs and wages, continually presenting the end result to the workforce as a compromise or "lesser evil" aimed at "saving the plant" and ensuring "long-term job security". In reality, every compromise only served to bring the closure of the plant one step closer.

Even at this point Einenkel and the Opel executive are seeking to dupe the workers. The stop to production of autos at the plant was not the end of the world, Sedran declared: "Opel will remain in Bochum in future, not only with its logistics center, but also with a potential for component manufacturing, yet to be determined."

The logistics centre with 430 employees is to be preserved and up to 1,000 workers could allegedly be employed in the planned components department. In addition, Opel and the state of North Rhine-Westphalia, where the city is located, are reportedly in talks about

“other alternatives.”

This is all part of a long worked out and hackneyed charade aimed at bolstering hopes in a section of the workforce to keep them quiet. This year alone Opel has cut 2,600 jobs in Europe, mostly in Germany, and just two weeks ago management called in the mediation board to initiate the closure of the Bochum plant II, where 300 workers produce auto parts, including gear boxes.

The invocation of the mediation board required the Opel works council to begin negotiations within a period of two weeks. The purpose of such negotiations is restricted to ironing out conditions for the 300 workers who will lose their jobs. Unlike other jobs in vehicle production Opel can terminate the contracts of the 300 workers without notice, thereby significantly reducing its severance costs. Following the closure of the Bochum plant II it remains a mystery what components could ever be built at the factory in future.

On November 30 Eienkel called upon the early shift, about 1,000 workers, to assemble in front of the factory gate to protest the closure of the gear box plant. Eienkel then used the opportunity to cynically prepare the workforce for the definitive closure of the entire factory. “This could be a dress rehearsal for plant I”, he blustered, claiming that the action was only a first warning: “We can also play rough.”

At the staff meeting on Monday Eienkel declared that there had “been many who have said from this place that no more cars will be built. We will continue to build cars after 2016”, he added, in order to pacify workers.

Up until now the works council in Bochum has accepted all job losses and wage cuts. The lessons of the past lead to one inescapable conclusion. The only way to prevent the closure of the Bochum plant is for workers to organize themselves independently of the works council and the IG Metall.



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