

Germany's Left Party and the closure of GM-Opel's Bochum plant

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The closure of the Opel factory in Bochum is the first such auto plant closure in Germany since 1949. At a factory meeting on December 10, Opel management announced that production would cease by the end of 2016 at the latest.

Workers are extremely angry and bitter and there were several disturbances at the meeting. The following day, more than 200 workers downed tools for several hours.

On Saturday, December 15, management then cancelled a long-planned celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of the Bochum plant, citing security concerns. They clearly anticipated there could be protests and other actions against the plant closure. Following the announcement of closure, it was thought that some 40,000 might attend the celebrations, planned as part of an "Open Day", instead of the 15,000 originally planned.

Under these circumstances, the Left Party sprang into action to divert workers' opposition into a dead end and provide support to the factory council and the IG Metall trade union. Both played a key role for years in helping management destroy jobs at Opel and strangle any opposition.

Last Thursday the Bundestag (federal parliament) discussed the closure of the Bochum plant at the request of Left Party deputy Sevim Dagdelen.

Dagdelen, who comes from Bochum, told the assembled parliamentarians: "Opel staff are under attack on two fronts, by the federal government and by the vicious policies of the GM management." Opel was the first victim of the European cuts diktats of Chancellor Angela Merkel, who had contributed to the collapse of the auto markets, particularly in the south of the continent, Dagdelen continued.

However, Dagdelen then appealed to the very same

Merkel not to "abandon" Bochum workers. The federal government must "search for alternatives to closure together with employees and management", she demanded, crying: "Madam Chancellor, make Opel your top priority!"

She demanded that Merkel put "pressure on GM management" to ensure there was a "guarantee of employment for Opel workers" beyond 2016. Dagdelen invited the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), Christian Social Union (CSU), Free Democratic Party (FDP), Social Democratic Party (SPD) and Greens to join the initiative of the Left Party for a ban on mass redundancies.

A more impotent and bankrupt perspective cannot be imagined.

If things went according to the Left Party, Opel workers in Bochum should not unite with their colleagues throughout Germany, Europe and the US in order to fight plant closures, sackings and social cuts. Instead, they should humbly petition the powers that be in Berlin and place their hopes in Merkel, who is responsible for the brutal austerity measures being implemented throughout Europe.

In an interview with the local newspaper WAZ, Merkel made clear that she has no intention of getting involved in the Opel case. In contrast to 2008, when the crisis of GM threatened all of Opel's factories, the federal government will not intervene now, Merkel said.

"If now, one of several plants loses the production of autos, then it is without doubt a blow for Bochum and the people there, but nevertheless is a business matter for which the employer is responsible", the chancellor stressed.

As far as a ban on mass sackings, this demand is a ploy. As long as the factory remains in private

ownership and dependent on competition in the world market, such a ban is unrealisable. The shareholders would simply withdraw their capital from the factories affected, driving them into bankruptcy.

The Left Party categorically dismisses a socialist programme to defend jobs, which encompasses the expropriation and socialization of large enterprises and banks, and the reorganization of production in the interest of society as a whole.

The close alliance between the Left Party and the chair of the Bochum works council Rainer Eienkel should be seen in this regard.

For years, Eienkel has played a key role in enabling the gradual winding down of the Bochum plant. Eienkel and IG Metall have supported the destruction of jobs and lowering of wages at every step. They presented every concession granted to the company as being essential to “save production at Bochum”. In reality, every concession supported by the factory council has only brought closure of the plant one step closer.

Now the discontent of the workforce is directed not only against management, but increasingly against IG Metall and Eienkel. The Left Party is trying to provide support to both.

On December 3, the chair of the Left Party parliamentary group, Gregor Gysi, met with Eienkel and the Bochum factory council, to prominent media coverage. At that time, Opel had announced the closure of the transmission plant at Bochum, with the loss of 300 jobs. The closure of Bochum in its entirety had not been announced officially, but the possibility was in the air, and Eienkel was undoubtedly in the know.

Apart from a few generalities about solidarity, the meeting with Gysi did not produce anything new. Its purpose was exclusively to provide the embattled Eienkel with a “left” cover.

Eienkel and the Left Party have a long history in common. Until 1988 he was a member of the German Communist Party (DKP), the West German off-shoot of the governing party in the then-East Germany, the Socialist Unity Party (SED). Following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1990 and the demise of East Germany, he fostered relations with the successor organisations of the SED, the Party of the Democratic Left (PDS) and then the Left Party. He once invited Left Party leader Oskar Lafontaine to Bochum.

Now, the Left Party, the factory council, and IG Metall are working closely together to keep opposition to the closure under control and try to smoothly close the plant. Their reaction to the cancellation of the anniversary celebrations is typical in this regard. There can be no doubt that this came just in time, as far as they were concerned.

Although the IG Metal could have called its own meeting, they called on the workforce to stay at home and not come to the plant. The call by the factory council at Johnson Controls, one of the main Opel supply firms, to hold their own meeting fell on deaf ears at the IG Metall.

Instead, the union and factory council at Opel fobbed off the workforce and their families, saying there would be a grand festival “with the people of the region, the unions, artists, [social] initiatives and many celebrities” at the beginning of next year. By then, they hope to have quelled the initial outrage.

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