

GM-Opel: German Left Party leader contacts US ambassador

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Following the announcement by General Motors on December 10 to close its Opel subsidiary factory in the German city of Bochum, the Left Party has offered its services to the Bochum works council, the IG Metall trade union and the German and US governments to assist in stifling any opposition by workers.

One week before the official announcement of the closure the parliamentary leader of the Left Party, Gregor Gysi, met publicly with the chairman of the Bochum works council, Reiner Eienkel, to declare his solidarity with the policy of the unions.

After the decommissioning of the plant, Left Party deputy Sevim Dagdelen made an appeal for clemency to German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who has played a leading role in imposing unprecedented austerity throughout Europe.

“Chancellor, make Opel your top priority,” Dagdelen implored in the German parliamentary debate on the fate of the German factory.

It now emerges that Gysi has contacted the Obama administration about Opel via the US embassy in Berlin. Dagdelen announced this on December 27 in a guest column for the Left Party broadsheet, *Neues Deutschland*.

Dagdelen writes that Gysi had “taken the right initiative and sought contact with the US embassy, because GM was 25 percent owned by the American state”. Dagdelen said that Berlin would be well advised to “use its good relations with the US government to negotiate over Opel”.

This speaks volumes about the role of the Left Party. The Obama administration has “revamped” the US auto industry with the same drastic methods now being applied at Opel and to attack the wages and social standards of workers all over the world. The US administration acted entirely in the interest of the

financial elite, and not on behalf of auto workers.

The Task Force appointed by Obama to the auto industry was mainly made up of Wall Street grandees. It was led by Steven Rattner, a finance manager with a personal fortune of almost €450 million (about \$610 million).

On the initiative of Obama’s Task Force, government officials forced a bailout on the auto workers to destroy the social gains they had won over decades: higher wages, health insurance, pensions, benefits, education for their children. Fourteen plants closed, and the total US workforce halved to about 64,000 workers. Whole towns that depend on the auto industry have been plunged into poverty.

GM lowered the wages of new hires by half and froze the salaries of remaining staff for years. This entire strategy was backed by the United Auto Workers Union (UAW), which works closely with the German IG Metall. Among other concessions, the UAW expressly agreed not to strike until 2015.

Dagdelen did not report the content of Gysi’s discussions with the US embassy, but it is not the first time that the leader of the Left Party has sought out the American ambassador, who resides just a few meters away from the Bundestag.

According to a dispatch released by WikiLeaks, two years ago Gysi spoke with US Ambassador Philip Murphy, who had worked for Goldman Sachs for 23 years, regarding Left Party policy towards NATO. Gysi sought to assure the US ambassador that Left Party demands for the dissolution of the Atlantic military alliance were not to be taken literally.

Rather, such demands were a tactical maneuver aimed at keeping representatives of the party’s “left wing” quiet. In the absence of such a demand, elements in the Left Party would raise the much more dangerous

proposal of Germany's withdrawal from NATO. A demand for the dissolution of NATO, however, would never win support because it would require the approval of France, Britain and the United States. As long as NATO exists, the Left Party would support Germany's membership, Gysi assured Murphy. (See: "WikiLeaks and the Left Party")

What did Gysi tell the former investment banker Murphy this time? That the Left Party's criticisms of GM management were designed merely to head off resistance to the plant closure? That GM could depend on the services of the German IG Metall and the head of Bochum works council Eienkel—a former member of West Germany's Stalinist German Communist Party (DKP)—just as it had done with the UAW, with the Left Party providing the necessary political cover?

Eienkel and IG Metall have repeatedly agreed to job and wage cuts in recent years, each time presenting such concessions as the price to pay for "rescuing the plant". In fact every concession by the unions only brought closures one step closer. Since Eienkel took over the chairmanship of the Bochum works council in early 2005, around 70 percent of all jobs have been slashed. Now the remaining 3,300 jobs are to go.

In the meantime, GM and Opel are preparing further attacks. According to a report in *Der Spiegel*, Opel will further wind down its production in the coming year. In 2013 the company will produce just 845,000 autos in Europe. This corresponds to a drop of more than ten percent, compared to 2012. Plants of Opel in Germany and Vauxhall in Great Britain would be producing at half capacity, meaning that further plant closures and layoffs are inevitable.

The bankruptcy of Opel is also an option. According to a December 20 report in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Opel has sold back six of its European subsidiaries to GM, including: "The engine plant in Szentgotthard (Hungary), the transmission production facility in Aspern (Austria), the development center in Turin (Italy), and the production plant in Gliwice, Poland, as well as other facilities in the UK and Russia."

These European subsidiaries had been transferred by GM to Opel to shield them from the bankruptcy of GM in America. Now that GM no longer faces bankruptcy, this transfer is being reversed. This means that the only remaining Opel plants are located in Bochum,

Rüsselsheim, Eisenach and Kaiserslautern in Germany, plus works in Zaragoza, Spain, and Ellesmere Port (GB).

According to the FAZ report, the return of its former subsidiaries was a condition for the continued payment of a €2.5 billion loan by GM to Opel. In the event of an Opel bankruptcy, GM now retains an important component of its production facilities in Europe, the paper writes.

At the end of 2011, US bank Morgan Stanley had already advocated putting Opel into bankruptcy, which would also enable the company to bypass some of its pension obligations, estimated to be around €5 billion.

The defense of jobs at Opel and throughout the auto industry requires an international socialist strategy. Jobs, wages and social gains can only be defended in a struggle against the main allies of Opel and GM management and the banks, the trade unions and works councils. This requires the unity of the workforces of all plants in Germany, Europe and the US.

The defense of every job must be the starting point for the mobilization of the working class on the basis of a socialist program, which expropriates and nationalizes major companies and the banks, and reorganizes production in the interest of the whole society.

The intervention of the Left Party is aimed precisely at preventing such a development. Instead it seeks to hinder any serious struggle to defend jobs by arousing false expectations in the German and American government, while working closely together with them against auto workers.



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