German trade unions reject action to defend GM-Opel plant

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25 January 2013

”This is absolute nonsense, utter nonsense” was the response of trade union leader Rainer Einenkel to a call for indefinite strike against the impending closure of the GM-Opel plant in Bochum, Germany.

Einenkel, who leads the works council at the plant, was speaking at a public meeting on Monday, organised by the Left Party and titled “Solidarity instead of poverty—Opel Bochum must stay”. The refusal of the IG Metall trade union and the works council to organise any serious action against the closure of the plant has increasingly met with resistance on the part of the workforce, and the Left Party meeting was a blatant attempt to shore up the union bureaucracy.

The Left Party was represented at the meeting by leading members such as the deputy chair of its parliamentary fraction, Sahra Wagenknecht, the Bochum Left Party MP Sevim Dagdelen, and the head of its local organisation, Rüdiger Sagel. The aim of the contributions at the meeting was to disguise the fact that Opel workers confront not only the hostility of company executives at both General Motors (GM) and Opel, but also their own works council and IG Metall. The Left Party provided a public platform for Einenkel—a former DKP (German Communist Party) member—to appear alongside a local IG Metall official and a representative of a leading German Welfare Association, Holger Schelte, and justify his rejection of any struggle to defend the jobs of auto workers in Bochum.

Einenkel was the first main speaker and also concluded the meeting. At the start of his opening comments, he hinted that although car production in Bochum was scheduled to “end no later than 2016,” it could also finish earlier. He made no mention, however, of the letter every Opel worker received the very next morning from Opel supervisory board chairman Stephen Girsky threatening to cease production in Bochum in late 2014 if workers refuse to accept further wage cuts. Einenkel is a member of the supervisory board. It must be assumed, therefore, that he was informed in advance of this letter. But on Monday, he said nothing about the letter, thereby leaving the initiative entirely to management.

Einenkel addressed the “activities” undertaken by the works council to oppose the closure—in fact, these consisted of no more than a three-hour work stoppage over a period of six weeks since announcement of the closure—and then announced a work stoppage for Tuesday. No Opel worker could have anticipated that on the same day, they would be confronted with yet another act of intimidation by management. Girsky began his letter “Dear employees” and continued: “As long as we make losses we are unable to afford wage increases. What we need are more significant savings.” The existing job security agreement is due to expire at the end of 2014. “As of January 1, 2015, production in Bochum will cease completely. It is planned that production of the F13 transmission ends later this year.” The callousness and arrogance of the company management is a direct result of its intimate relationship with the works council and IG Metall. Girsky knows very well that Einenkel and his cohorts will not provide any resistance.

At the Left Party meeting, Einenkel spoke at length about the concessions forced upon the workforce in the other Opel plants in Germany, Spain and the UK by local works councils and trade unions. He stressed that the workforce in Bochum had accepted numerous cuts.

When some Opel workers then criticised the postponement of a 4.3 percent wage increase due to paid last fall, Einenkel vehemently defended the concession. “After long consideration we unanimously agreed to this deferral in order to ensure we were not isolated”, he stressed. In other words, the approval of the wage deferral served to pit workforces in Europe against one other. If Bochum workers had not agreed to this pay cut, the plant would have been closed immediately, Einenkel declared. On the basis of this sort of argument there is no bottom limit when it comes to concessions.

Dietmar Kupfer, the works council chairman of Johnson Controls, an automotive supplier in Bochum, then requested to speak in the discussion. He revealed that Johnson Controls had already announced it planned to close its plant with around 800 employees if Opel stopped production in Bochum. Kupfer declared that it was wrong to concentrate in the discussion on possible alternative projects for the Bochum plant—a hobby horse of the plant works council and trade union—but rather, “What should we do? Are we going to accept the closure without a fight?” Einenkel did not answer directly, but left no doubt where he stood. When challenged by a former Opel works councillor, Aribert Gunther, who declared, “You harass

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people who want to fight," Einenkel essentially conceded this was the case.

While he rejected the term "harass", Einenkel ruled out calls for any effective action. In response to demands from workers that genuine strike action should be taken, Einenkel roared: "This is absolute nonsense, utter nonsense." Other plants had already asked if they could take over the production carried out at Bochum, he said. Einenkel once again confirmed he is adamantly opposed to any common struggle of all auto workers at all locations, although there have been a number of strikes in neighbouring European countries in recent weeks.

Workers have gone on strike at the Peugeot factory in Aulnay-sous-Bois, near Paris, and at the Ford plant in Genk, Belgium. Workers at supplier plants in Genk are also participating in the strike.

The local IGM official Eva Kerkemeier, who could barely speak due to laryngitis, made a pathetic appeal: "Let's not quarrel now…. Let's celebrate together on March 3." On March 3, a Sunday, and nearly three months after the announcement of the plant closure, the IGM and works council have organised a "solidarity party" in Bochum. Einenkel explained that not only had local churches and employees at the local theatre declared their solidarity, but also the chamber of trade and industry in Bochum. "We are proud of that and we will maintain such contacts."

The Left Party, IG Metall and the works council seek to mask their right-wing policies behind a wall of radical phrases. On Monday, this was left to Sahra Wagenknecht, who ranted against the "decision-making power of shareholders only interested in profit", criticised anti-welfare measures ("Hartz IV has to go!"), as well as the European policy of the government headed by Angela Merkel (Christian Democratic Union, CDU).

Wagenknecht came from Berlin where she had taken part in a press conference to present the eight-member team selected to represent the Left Party in this year's federal election campaign. Wagenknecht and the Left Party have repeatedly made clear—most recently in the recent state election in Lower Saxony—that their main aim is to lever the SPD into power (i.e., the very same party which introduced the Hartz anti-welfare laws).

As the WSWS has reported in a number of articles, Wagenknecht is an ardent admirer of the conservative politician Ludwig Erhard (CDU), who was Germany's postwar economics minister and later chancellor. In her speech to the meeting in Bochum, she addressed the issue of nationalisation. "In 2009", she declared, "the Left Party demanded that state subventions for Opel be tied to participation in the company." In his own introductory remarks, Dagdelen claimed, "We would not be in the current situation in the event of a nationalisation or partial nationalisation of Opel." This argument is utterly fraudulent. The nationalisation of Opel by the federal government under the existing economic system solves nothing for workers. Under President Barack Obama, the US government took over more than 60 percent of GM's shares in 2009. Obama's "auto task force" then ensured that the workforce was halved, many plants were closed down and starting wages were reduced by 50 percent. Obama was able to push all this through with the active support of the United Auto Workers Union (UAW), which has been rewarded for its complicity with a large proportion of company shares.

The Left Party evidently favours a similar solution in Germany. Left Party parliamentary group leader Gregor Gysi recently met with the American ambassador, and although the content of their discussion has not been made public, it is likely they spoke about Opel and a reorganisation of the company along the same lines as GM.

Members of the Socialist Equality Party distributed leaflets before and after the meeting in Bochum, which stated:

"Instead of begging for alms and supporting the Merkel government it is necessary to make the defence of jobs at Opel Bochum the starting point for a broad political movement of the working class to overthrow the government. This is the first step in the fight for a workers' government that expropriates the major corporations and banks and places them under democratic control.

"Independent action committees must be established to oppose the class collaboration of the works councils and establish close international contact with factories and workers around the world in a coordinated struggle to defend jobs, wages and social standards internationally.

"At the heart of such a socialist perspective is the building of a new international party of the working party that combines the principled struggle to defend jobs with the struggle against war and colonialism."

The "solidarity evening" organised by the Left Party in Bochum confirms that the party is mobilising all its forces to prevent such a perspective. Its "solidarity" extends exclusively to Einenkel, his works council, the union, and the existing political establishment.

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