

Germany: A new capitulation by the IG Metall union to Opel management

Philipp Frisch
4 February 2013

In the course of negotiations on the future of Opel, the IG Metall (Industrial Union of Metalworkers) trade union has made further concessions to the company management. The demand for auto production in Bochum to be extended beyond 2016 was omitted from the resolution of the union's bargaining committee. Instead, IGM is now negotiating over the period "after the expiry of current vehicle production", together with associated "replacement jobs" in Bochum.

One has to "deal with the realities created by the [company's] executive", announced Armin Schild, IG Metall's leading spokesman in the state of Hesse and member of the Opel supervisory board. "So all that's left for us to do is to tell the company our minimum demands for the securing of all sites, including the Bochum site, even if no vehicles are to be produced there", said Schild. This is the response of IG Metall to Stephen Girsky's move to blackmail the workforce.

Girsky, GM vice chairman, interim president of GM Europe and chairman of the Opel supervisory board, recently issued Opel workers an ultimatum: Either accept a further deterioration in pay or the Bochum plant will be closed two years earlier.

Girsky said: "We need to continue reducing costs". To achieve this goal, "all employees will have to play their part". As long as Opel is making losses, "we can't afford, for example, any wage increases". Girsky went on to threaten: "What we need are more substantial savings"; otherwise, the Opel plant at Bochum would be closed after expiry of the so-called job security agreement for the site at the end of 2014.

Girsky's call for "substantial savings" in fact means the destruction of many thousands of jobs in all Opel factories and those of their suppliers. The Opel management wants to reduce fixed costs by another €375 million (US\$512 million) by 2015. In the name of

"competitiveness" and "flexibility", Opel workers are expected to forgo a significant portion of their wages before being thrown into the street.

The aggressive attacks of management are made possible by its close collaboration with IG Metall and the works council. This is an arrangement based on a tried and trusted division of labour between Bochum works council head Rainer Eienkel, on the one hand, and IG Metall and the general works council, on the other. In public, Eienkel continually expresses outrage at the humiliating course of negotiations and—in the case of the recent concessions demanded—the "unheard of state of affairs". He is always saying he has "never seen" anything like what is going on.

In reality, all parties are acting in unison and pulling together. They work hand in hand to implement the cuts to the workforce demanded by GM. As a member of the supervisory board, Eienkel must have known in advance about Girsky's intention to blackmail the workers, but he kept it secret until the last moment. When Girsky then sent out his letter to employees, Eienkel spoke of a "declaration of war", at the same time calling for a comprehensive laying down of arms. When challenged to organise a strike and initiate a serious fight-back, he replied: "That's absolute nonsense, utter stupidity".

For decades, Eienkel and other union officials touted the so-called social partnership as the best way to promote workers' interests. They stressed that compromises were better than confrontations. But now that the economic crisis has undermined the "social partnership" and company management is mounting a frontal attack on the workforce, Eienkel and company say nothing can be done to defend jobs and position themselves firmly on the side of the company against the workers.

The result of this bankrupt perspective can be seen at the Bochum Opel plant. When Eienkel was elected chairman of the works council in December 2004, some 10,000 people were still employed at the Opel factory in Bochum.

In the nearly 10 years that Eienkel has led the works council, he has refused to mount any serious opposition to the management's plans and degraded Opel workers to the status of mere petitioners. Almost 70 percent of the workers have been laid off. Wages have also been drastically reduced in this period. Opel employees were pressured to waive their vacation and Christmas bonuses. Last year's wage increase of 4.3 percent was "deferred".

But Eienkel's concessions do not go far enough for the general works council chairman, Wolfgang Schäfer-Klug. Two weeks ago, he angrily rejected Eienkel's contention that Girsky's letter to employees amounted to a declaration of war. He demanded that such threats be avoided in future because they might unsettle the management. Doing so, he said, would run the risk of the management terminating the ongoing negotiations over the work site at Bochum.

Schäfer-Klug is typical of the IG Metall functionaries who exploit their role in the betrayal of workers' interests in order to climb to a position in the company management. Just 13 years ago, he was engaged by the then-chairman, Klaus Franz, as academic consultant for the general works council. He then quickly rose to the post of coordinator of the European branch of the General Motors works council. His task was the development of trade union networks covering GM in Europe, North America, Latin America, Asia and central and eastern Europe. He played a key role in arranging for each work site to "defend" its interests by pitting itself against all the others, thus preventing the emergence of a common struggle of all GM employees against the management.

Last January, he became chairman of the works council in Opel's Rüsselsheim plant and deputy chairman of the supervisory board. He also took over management of the European works council and became chairman of the general and GM group works councils. Now he is earning his spurs for a further ascent.

He works as an agent of management and is a close friend of Girsky's. Girsky is also closely associated

with the unions. He was an analyst for JP Morgan Stanley and worked for GM, before being hired by Bob King, president of the United Auto Workers (UAW), to become a union consultant. He is still working for the UAW, managing its multibillion-dollar pension trust.

GM was so pleased with Girsky's work for the trust fund that it took him onto the company's executive board. He was eventually placed at the head of the Opel supervisory board, which enabled him to rake in earnings from both IG Metall and the Opel works council, while dramatically accelerating the exploitation of the workforce.

IG Metall boss Berthold Huber also has close ties to Girsky and was heavily involved in the leadership change at Opel. It was recently confirmed that Volkswagen manager Karl-Thomas Neumann would be made CEO at Opel on March 1. The supervisory board, on which Eienkel also has a seat, has confirmed his appointment.

Thus, the chairman of IG Metall personally selects the personnel who then implement the next round of cuts, sackings and plant closures. This development shows that the union is completely on the side of the GM management. It also underlines the reality that workers can defend their jobs at Opel only by breaking with IG Metall and the works council.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact