German Socialist Alternative group aids union sellout at Opel

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Employees defending their jobs and wages are confronted not only by company managements, but also trade unions that use their entire apparatus to stifle any sign of effective opposition from workers. This is particularly evident in the case of the IG Metall union at Opel.

The largest single trade union in the world has long since transformed itself into a profit-oriented company that is utterly hostile to the interests of the workers it supposedly represents. According to the trading weekly *Wirtschaftswoche*, IG Metall collects €460 million annually from its members and has assets estimated at €2 billion, which it increasingly invests in company shares.

Some 1,700 IG Metall representatives sit on company supervisory boards, where they are handsomely rewarded and merge with management. The most important asset of the organisation consists in the approximately 50,000 works council members and 80,000 shop stewards in the companies. This powerful apparatus is used to control and oppress the workers. Wage cuts and job eliminations are often prepared directly in the union headquarters and then enforced on the workers.

In recent years, IG Metall has worked closely with the Opel management executive to cut wages and dismantle thousands of jobs. In December of last year, General Motors finally announced the end of car production at its Bochum plant in 2016, after IG Metall and the works council under Rainer Einenkel had repeatedly agreed to accept job losses and wage cuts.

In January, the management demanded a further wage reduction from the Bochum workers, and threatened to bring the plant's closure forward to 2014. As in previous years, IG Metall officials concealed this blackmail as long as possible in order to justify their mantra that any opposition would be futile. Einenkel ridiculed calls for strikes or serious industrial action as "absolute nonsense" and "completely crazy". He made it clear that IG Metall was only interested in imposing the previously jointly approved cuts and closures on the workers.

Workers are increasingly comprehending the role played by the union, and opposition is mounting. Employees of the Bochum factory are considering turning their backs on IG Metall and organising mass resignations from the union. A contributor to the official Opel forum of workers, who called for such action, received dozens of responses within a day from angry colleagues, welcoming such a move and declaring their support.

IG Metall is extremely alarmed about this development and is using its entire apparatus to suppress any upsurge of an independent movement of the workers. It is supported in this by various pseudo-left groups, deeply enmeshed in the union bureaucracy. The main aim of these groups is to bind workers to the reactionary trade union bureaucracy.

The prototype of such an organisation is Socialist Alternative (SAV), which operates within the German Left Party and is recruited to a significant extent from union bureaucrats and works council representatives. On its web site earlier this month, SAV published an open letter to the IG Metall executive board. The sole purpose of the letter was to strengthen the hand of the union and defend it against increasing opposition from the workers.

The letter is from the Alternative group at the Daimler work site in Berlin, which is dominated by SAV. At the works council election in 2010, the group received 25 percent of the vote, yielding five mandates. The official IG Metall list was spurned by workers due

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to the union's failure to counter continuing wage cuts and poor working conditions. Most of the Alternative group members in the works council are also members of IG Metall and see themselves as constituting its "left" wing.

The letter proposes a few symbolic measures for industrial action at Opel in Bochum, especially designed to prevent workers breaking from IG Metall. It defends the role of the union in the planned closure of car production at Opel's Bochum plant and fosters the illusion that IG Metall opposes the closure.

"Our colleague, Berthold Huber", says the letter, "was right when he said in December, 'If Opel now wants to dismantle the production of all cars, then that's an open declaration of war on us' ".

"Colleague Huber" is the chairman of IG Metall and also deputy chair of the supervisory boards at Siemens, Audi and VW, as well as a board member at Porsche. The four companies have a combined market capitalisation of €158 billion. Huber celebrated his 60th birthday in Angela Merkel's chancellery. Apart from an SAV trade unionist, nobody else would entertain the notion of calling him a "colleague". Only a few weeks previously, Huber had defended the luxury travel arrangements and remuneration financed by the ThyssenKrupp steel concern for union representatives on its supervisory board.

Workers have long experienced at first hand how these richly paid bureaucrats operate as the right hand of company management and do nothing to defend their rights. But Alternative pretends to be surprised and acts as though the betrayal is an unusual kind of slip-up: "But what irritated us", they write, "were last month's calls from the works council and IG Metall top-dogs for 'calm'. At the press conference on December 10, Rainer Einenkel even said there was a need to avoid the threat of 'blind activism' ".

To stave off the employees' opposition to the union, the IG Metall leadership is proposing a number of symbolic actions that are supposed to "bring pressure to bear". These include "solidarity events" and a "major demonstration". A stop-work stunt will be held in Bochum itself.

The union leadership proudly describes IG Metall as an organisation that was founded "so that employees of separate businesses need not be left alone to fend for themselves". It attempts to sow the illusion that the union could be transformed into a fighting organisation, leading the struggle for the defence of all jobs in the car industry.

But the transformation of the unions into co-managers and the anti-labour orientation of their officials are not the product of a false policy of the union leadership or its moral decay. The deeper causes of these developments lie in the bankruptcy of the trade union perspective itself, and this is an international phenomenon.

All around the world, trade unions have transferred their allegiance wholly onto the side of the employer. Consequently, they are constantly trying to stifle the formation of any independent movement of the workers and enforcing the most brutal cuts in wages and conditions onto the workforce.

These attacks on the working class are a direct expression of an intensification of the class struggle. The degree of social devastation being heaped upon workers in Greece, Spain and Portugal—and also in Germany and France—no longer leaves room for the social compromises and concessions that trade unions were once able to negotiate. Therefore, not only is the state resorting to authoritarian methods; the trade unions have also transformed themselves into repressive organisations.

Groups such as SAV are an integral part of the bureaucratic milieu and trade union structures. They specialise in defending the bureaucracy against the anger of workers and disguise its reactionary nature by promoting symbolic "left-wing" stunts.

A break with these organisations is the first step required for the mounting of a political offensive of workers against the crushing austerity measures imposed by the government and big business. Such a campaign necessitates the building of a new international party of the working class fighting for a socialist programme.

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