

The way forward in the fight against the closure of GM-Opel's Bochum plant

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Many Opel workers are furious with their factory works council and the IG Metall trade union because of their refusal to organise any sort of struggle against the announced closure of the GM-Opel plant in Bochum. Workers sense that the decision to close down the factory was made not only for economic reasons. It is aimed at enforcing the capitulation of a workforce which has a long history of militant struggle.

The Socialist Equality Party (PSG) and the *World Socialist Web Site* call for the unification of all workers seeking to fight the plant closure. To do this it is necessary to break through the straitjacket of the works council and the IG Metall and establish an action committee of rank-and-file workers to prepare a sit-in strike to block the shutdown of the factory.

A sit-in strike is necessary to defend the productive facilities and jobs against the destructive plans of the company executive and their union lackeys. The Opel plant, in common with all other factories, provides the basis for the livelihoods of thousands of workers and their families and cannot be surrendered without a fight.

A bold move against the arbitrary shut down of the Opel plant in Bochum would undoubtedly win support from workers in other plants. It would send a powerful signal to workers at all other company plants and associated supplier companies. In addition it would be a clarion call for workers at ThyssenKrupp, Eon, Commerzbank, Deutsche Telekom, Lufthansa, Air Berlin, etc. who all face layoffs and cuts in their wages and conditions.

Such a measure would also resonate with workers at General Motors in Detroit, whose wages were cut by half, and encourage joint action by workers throughout Europe, the US and internationally against the campaign by the global auto giants to destroy jobs, living standards and working conditions. All over the world, workers are looking for a section of workers to take the initiative and confront the craven servility of the unions.

A sit-in strike must be well prepared. The action committee of rank-and-file workers that prepares it must operate completely independently from the unions. Union officials must be barred from any participation.

In their own Internet forum Opel workers have contemptuously referred to their corrupt works council, describing the metal workers union, IG Metall, as "IG-Tin" or "IG Powerless". Some have suggested a mass exodus from the union. Others are demanding protest marches to union headquarters to bring those responsible to justice. Still others demand an end to contribution

payments to the IG Metall and the setting up of an independent fighting fund.

This widespread opposition must be transformed into a conscious rebellion against the union. In doing this, workers must reject the so-called "Offensive" group inside the works council. It is a front for the Maoist group, the MLPD (Marxist-Leninist Party of Germany), which maintains close links with the trade union apparatus. "Offensive" insists that the fight against plant closure must be subordinated to the organizational and political authority of the union. In fact the opposite is the case. If the struggle is subordinated to the IG Metall, it is doomed.

The IG Metall believes it is all-powerful and tries to intimidate all those who question its diktats. According to the German magazine *Wirtschaftswoche* the union has transformed itself into a major company, which collects 460 million euro annually from its members and has assets estimated at two billion euro. The union increasingly invests these assets on the stock market. The union has a total of 1,700 representatives on company boards, who are handsomely rewarded and in practice indistinguishable from management.

The IG Metall uses its apparatus and its many thousands of factory functionaries to suppress any opposition. The union's right-wing policy is a direct result of its unconditional defence of the capitalist profit system. Rather than abolishing capitalism the union seeks to mould it, above all to its own pecuniary advantage.

Its officials move effortlessly from union headquarters into leading positions in the boardrooms of corporations and inside government. On April 1 the district head of the IG Metall in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia, Oliver Burkhard, is due to take over as personnel manager at ThyssenKrupp. In exchange for a seven-figure salary he will be directly responsible for dismantling thousands of jobs. According to German law, works council members cannot be made redundant and they will retain their income and upper middle class lifestyles even if the factory closes. It is not unusual for them to cash in from the factory closure, or be appointed to lucrative posts in "transfer companies" set up for the workers losing their jobs.

The globalization of production has completely undermined the traditional trade union policy based on social compromise and class collaboration. International companies, such as General Motors, are able shift production to any location in the world that offers the lowest wages and the worst working conditions. The only answer the nationally based unions have had to globalization

is to collaborate with the capitalists in their “own” country to lower production costs and increase competitiveness.

On this basis, the unions suppress any struggle against the global corporations and insist that wage cuts, layoffs, benefit cuts and plant closures are inevitable. Rather than uniting workers across state and national boundaries, the unions pit workers against each other in a race to the bottom. This is how GM was able to close the Opel plant in Antwerp, Belgium.

All over the world trade unions play the same role. In the US the United Auto Workers collaborated with Obama's restructuring of the auto industry with tens of thousands of layoffs and the halving of entry-level wages. In exchange the UAW was awarded share holdings in the big auto companies, giving the UAW bureaucracy a direct financial incentive to increase the exploitation of the workers it allegedly represents.

The defence of jobs requires an international, socialist perspective, which is diametrically opposed to the nationalist, pro-capitalist orientation of the unions. The right to work and wages is a fundamental and inalienable right that must be defended unconditionally. It is incompatible with a social order that subordinates the needs of the population to the profit sheets of the corporations and banks.

Five years ago the German government poured hundreds of billions of euros into the vaults of the banks to save them from the consequences of their criminal speculation. Now that money is being recouped at the expense of working people. With Greece as the starting point all of the social gains fought for by the workers' movement in Europe during the past 65 years are being wiped out.

The wealth and incomes of the rich are soaring while stock markets reach new record levels. At the same time poverty is growing rapidly. The crisis in the auto industry is a direct result of the fact that many people can no longer afford to buy a car. The crisis is being used to force Opel workers to their knees and begin a wave of layoffs and plant closures in Germany, France and throughout Europe. To this end GM-Opel management can fully rely on support from the employers' associations and the government.

The opposition parties also support this course. Ten years ago the Social Democratic Party, which maintains close links to the trade unions, passed the Hartz laws in alliance with the Greens, thereby creating a huge low-wage sector. For its part the Left Party pledges to assure the SPD a working majority and has intervened directly in Bochum to strengthen the hand of the Opel works council.

Opel's works council has now invited all these parties to a solidarity party next month to complain about the social misery for which it is directly responsible. What a farce! Not surprisingly this “festival of hypocrites” is due to begin with a church service for the future of the Opel plant, involving the works council and IG Metall functionaries praying together with representatives of the company, the local Chamber of Commerce and politicians from all parties.

The defence of jobs makes a political break with these parties unavoidable. A sit-in strike must be the starting point for a broad political movement that pursues its own strategy. Its goal cannot be to put pressure on the local government in Düsseldorf, the

federal government in Berlin or leaders of the SPD—which all answer to the demands of the global corporations and banks. Instead the aim of such a struggle must be to mobilize the strength of the entire working class and build new independent organizations to encourage the economic and political struggle of all workers.

Above all the working class requires a new socialist political party to fight for the establishment of a workers' government. With political power in its own hands, the working class can expropriate the auto companies, banks and large companies, place them under democratic control, and re-organise the economy to fulfil social need rather than maximise profit.

Such a struggle can only be successful on an international basis. It is necessary to establish close international contact with factories and workers around the world and coordinate the defence of jobs, wages and social standards across the globe. The editorial board of the *World Socialist Web Site* is ready to actively support such international cooperation.

Opel workers must rely on their own strength. The factory in Bochum was built fifty years ago in order to provide work for the thousands of miners who had lost their jobs following the closure of mines in the region. Many Opel workers came from families whose fathers and grandfathers fought in the Red Ruhr Army and later against the Nazi dictatorship.

In the nineteen seventies and eighties they organized massive strikes and were able to win wage increases and improved working conditions, which went far beyond the union's own demands. In 2004, Opel workers in Bochum undertook a six-day strike against mass layoffs. They began the strike against the expressed will of the IG Metall, which intervened to end the industrial action.

Now it is necessary to build a party that draws all the political lessons of past struggles and courageously fight for an international socialist program. We call upon all workers to study the history and record of the Socialist Equality Party (PSG), establish contact with the editorial board of the *World Socialist Web Site* and make the decision to join and build the PSG as the new, revolutionary leadership of the working class.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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