

IG Metall union seeks to finalize closure of GM-Opel Bochum plant

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1 March 2013

The close collaboration of the IG Metall union, Opel-General Motors management and the works council increasingly resembles a conspiracy against the workforce.

The IG Metall has long been informed about the closure plans for the Bochum plant, and agrees with them. The union's role is to advise the management how to proceed without any serious opposition by workers. The Bochum workforce, which has a long history of militant struggles, has been an obstacle to the union-management plan.

Counting on the collaboration of the union, management has moved aggressively, threatening the immediate closure of the plant if workers do not accept further concessions. The works council has issued formal complaints but is blocking any serious opposition and has denounced workers who want to fight of "endangering" negotiations. In the end, the works council hopes to organize the closure in stages, declaring this preferable to closure overnight.

Following this pattern, a factory meeting was held on Monday. The leader of the Bochum works council Rainer Eienkel, who for years has been part of the cynical interplay between the IG Metall, management and the works council, criticised the Opel-GM management for presenting a "catalogue of horrors" as a precondition for further negotiations.

Management's demands include the elimination of the night shift, with the loss of 700 jobs; an end to the hiring of apprentices after the end of the year and the cancellation of the apprentice program by 2016. In addition, the company is demanding the destruction of up to 3,000 jobs by 2016 and a wage freeze for the remaining workforce until at least 2015. This comes after employees have swallowed a pay cut of between 25 and 30 over the past decades.

While posturing as an opponent of these attacks, Eienkel sought to sow a sense of demoralization and inevitability over the plant closing, suggesting that the best workers could do was to beg for replacement jobs. He acknowledged, however, that management rejected the works council's proposal to bring engine production to Bochum to replace transmission production, which is ending by 2014.

Eienkel tacitly acknowledged that IG Metall and the works council had already accepted the shutdown of assembly operations at the plant. The works council's proposal that Opel create a components manufacturing facility and construct of technology centre for electric drive systems, lightweight composite materials and alternative jobs, Eienkel said, had been "noted" by management, which said it would "examine" the proposals.

Then Eienkel demagogically cried out, "that won't do!" as he accused management of blocking negotiations. The works council would not accept this refusal to negotiate by Opel's Detroit-based management at General Motors, and would force management to take its responsibilities seriously.

Then Eienkel called the vote. Many workers voted as a protest against the aggressive actions of management, although many understood the company was only able to get away with this because IG Metall and works council were opposed to any industrial action. However, Eienkel characterised the result as an "overwhelming vote of confidence" by the workforce in the works council.

At the end of January, IG Metall and the chair of the Opel central works council Dr. Wolfgang Schäfer-Klug agreed to the closure of auto production in Bochum. Armin Schild, district head of the IG Metall in Hesse and an Opel supervisory board member, said, "We have

to deal with the realities that the board creates.”

Even as the factory meeting was happening, the conservative daily *Die Welt* reported on Monday that an “agreement by management and employee representatives” regarding the “restructuring” of the German GM subsidiary Opel was in sight. It quoted an unnamed IG Metall spokesperson as saying: “We expect that we will have a result by the end of the week. That is our goal, and from today’s perspective that is feasible.”

They want to “have a result” even before the start of the upcoming round of collective bargaining, which begins in March. Otherwise, it would be difficult to “put forward recommendations for the 2013 bargaining round, when everything else at Opel was in the balance,” the union source said.

The factory meeting made clear that the IG Metall and works council are seeking to present workers a fait accompli about the closing of the plant in the next days. Many workers are extremely angry over this betrayal. On Internet forums, Opel workers have contemptuously referred to their corrupt works council, describing the metal workers union, IG Metall, as “IG-Tin” while others have suggested a mass exodus from the union and withholding union payments.

A struggle against the planned plant closure can only be conducted independently of the IG Metall and works council. Workers face the task of taking the fight into their own hands.

This is what was at the centre of the flyer distributed by WSWs supporters at the beginning of the factory meeting. The flyer states: “The Socialist Equality Party (SPG) 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.”



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