

IG Metall protest at Opel Bochum: A travesty of solidarity

Our correspondent
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Last Sunday, the IG Metall union and the works council held a so-called “solidarity festival” in Bochum ostensibly to support Opel workers facing the closure of their plant. The real purpose of the event was to pave the way for the shutdown, which the union and works council have already sanctioned.

The solidarity of the estimated 18,000 workers who attended the rally was exploited in order to conceal the role of IG Metall and the works council, which have been complicit in the destruction of workers’ jobs.

Actors from Bochum Theatre, artists and singers were part of a programme that included speeches by Social Democratic Party (SPD) politicians and union functionaries who have determined politics in the Ruhr area for decades and are responsible for massive cuts in social spending.

The organizers used the rally to try to bolster the credibility of the union and works council and counter the growing opposition of Opel workers in Bochum and at other plants against the union-management conspiracy. Workers are well aware that the shutdown of the Bochum plant—the first auto factory closing in Germany since the end of World War II—heralds a new round of attacks on all auto workers and the working class as a whole.

The IG Metall is closely associated with Opel management and its representatives on the factory floor operate to block all resistance. All the establishment parties—the SPD, Christian Democratic Union (CDU), Greens, Left Party—were present at the event, along with the social democrats from the city administration, cultural associations, local business associations and various social organisations, in order to help the union and works council maintain their grip over the workers.

Opel workers are being forced to accept the closure of the Bochum plant. To do this, they are being offered so-

called replacement jobs, which are just a chimera, or places in so-called safety-net companies that are just a preparation for the dole queue.

The growing conflict between the union, works council and the entire political establishment, on the one hand, and the Opel workers and their supporters on the other was apparent at the rally.

In brief remarks, the chair of the Opel Bochum works council, Rainer Eienkel, demagogically attacked the “inhumane actions” of the Opel-GM management. He then attempted to distance himself from the so-called “Deutschland Plan”, which the IG Metall and Opel Group works council agreed to last Thursday. Under the plan, IG Metall has sanctioned the closure of Bochum, the gradual destruction of 2,000 to 3,000 jobs as well as further pay cuts.

Eienkel stressed several times that he had not consented to the “Deutschland Plan” of the Opel Group works council and would not do so. This was pure posturing. Eienkel knows the Opel works council already has a majority for the plan, even without his vote. In his remarks, he signalled that the Bochum works council would accept the Opel works council’s decision. In other words, while tacitly supporting the shutdown of the plant, Eienkel is presenting himself as a victim forced against his own convictions to implement the job cuts.

Immediately following the ecumenical service that opened the “solidarity festival”, Eva Kerkemeier, principle IG Metall representative in Bochum-Herne, spoke. She presented Eienkel with a painting by Bochum artist Bernd Röttgers, and praised the steadfastness of the works council. Then she declared that no Opel workers would see the inside of the dole office.

However, the jobs massacre is beginning in just a few

weeks. The union and works council have agreed that the night shift in Bochum will go in April, and that 700 younger Opel workers (born after 1970) must go.

Even as they justify it by saying they are following “social criteria” the sacking of younger workers first is a deliberate move by the IG Metall and works council to rid the company of potentially more volatile workers.

IG Metall hopes it can then stem opposition by holding out a redundancy and retirement package to the remaining older workers. In this way, they are seeking to divide, grind down and entice a workforce—which has a rich tradition of struggle—into submission.

In his short address, Bochum Mayor Otilie Scholz (SPD) demanded the rapid deployment of “replacement jobs”. Dr. Scholz did not say the closure was a done deal even though her building department has already been in negotiations with Opel about the use of the site.

Workers who spoke to the World Socialist Web Site expressed a determination to fight. “We workers must organise things ourselves in order to achieve anything”, one Opel worker said, adding, “The IG Metall and works council are doing nothing”.

The bogus promise by GM and Opel to build a “component manufacturing facility” at the plant site by 2016 is “the beginning of the end”, Tanja said, who works in one of the supply companies in Ennepetal.

“There has to be industrial action at Opel” said Klaus W., an older worker who worked for many years at the Bochum Krupp steel mill and now works at the university in the building facilities service. “Without the pressure from the workforce nothing will happen” he said. “You can’t expect anything from the works council, they’re only looking after their own skins. They don’t do anything, their wages are paid by the company. They have other interests, and are clinging to the positions.”

Klaus described the close relationship between the IG Metall, the works council and the SPD at Krupp. “Of the 33 full-time works council members at Krupp, 31 are in the SPD. When the plant was closed, they were given other posts through the IG Metall and SPD. They land on their feet”.

This won’t happen to Herbert F. He has worked at the Opel No 1 Plant in Bochum since 1977. “For 15 years we have had our wages cut. I calculate that amounts to about 18 percent wage cut for me. Now they want to cut our Christmas bonus completely. In the past, we

received an additional month’s pay at Christmas.”

Herbert became particularly angry when talking about the Opel Group works council, which is isolating the Bochum workforce, “and the IG Metall is playing along. Eienkel is part of this game. If he were to say tomorrow that we are going on strike, I’d be there. But that won’t happen. Starting tomorrow, the IG Metall and the works council are continuing the negotiations” for the plant closing, he said, which will produce a disaster for him and many others.

The Left Party played a particularly pernicious role at the “solidarity festival”. Along with various pseudo-left groups, including the Stalinist MLPD, they formed a chorus of support for Eienkel, the works council and the IG Metall.

The WSWS had its own information booth at the event. The new edition of the auto workers’ newsletter met with great interest. The lead article, headlined “How to oppose the plant closure” calls on workers to set up an action committee independent of the IG Metall and prepare a plant occupation in defence of jobs and wages. These issues will form the basis of the discussion at the meeting called by the Socialist Equality Party/WSWS on Thursday.



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