

At mass meeting in Rüsselsheim

German auto union splits GM-Opel workforce

Our correspondent
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On the morning of Friday, March 15, several thousand employees crowded into the main hall of GM-Opel's headquarters in Rüsselsheim, near the city of Frankfurt-Main. The general mood was downcast. Workers were aware that more wage cuts and layoffs were on the agenda. But this time the situation was even worse than usual.

In the run up to Friday's meeting, the IG Metall engineering union and the Rüsselsheim works councils had agreed a so-called "Master Contract" that seals the closure of the Opel plant in Bochum and imposes lower wages, poorer working conditions and job cuts for the rest of the workers. The aim of the contract, according to management and the unions, is to restore Opel's profitability within three years. In fact, the plan is only a prelude to further plant closures and attacks on auto workers.

There was an eerie atmosphere within the meeting. Instead of giving a report on the situation, the works council organised a celebration for the company and invited the entire Opel executive staff. Featured alongside the speaker's platform was Opel's newest car model. At the start of the event large screens transmitted an ad from the Opel exhibit at the recent Geneva Motor Show to the accompaniment of loud pop music.

The entire event was aimed at intimidating the workforce, stifling any critical thought and suppressing any attempts to demonstrate solidarity with fellow workers in Bochum. It was part of an orchestrated campaign by management in close cooperation with IG Metall and the company joint works council (JWC) to enforce the closure of the factory in Bochum, and prevent a united struggle to defend jobs.

IG Metall and the joint works council have taken on the job of systematically pitting Opel workers against one

another. This is the purpose of the agreement with the marketing name "Master Contract Drive! 2022".

The union and JWC said the deal had to be concluded before March 1 to shore up the position of new Opel CEO Karl-Thomas Neumann. Neumann's switch from the board of Volkswagen to Opel was engineered by the head of IG Metall, Berthold Huber, who is also vice chairman at VW.

One day before the staff meeting, IG Metall organized meetings in Rüsselsheim, Kaiserslautern and at the company's Dudenhofen Test Center to demand that workers ratify the Master Contract. The union claimed rejection of the contract would have disastrous consequences. Those who did not agree with the plant closure in Bochum were undermining the company as a whole, they said, and therefore their own jobs. This was the tenor of speeches given by IGM district manager Armin Schild, and the JWC chairman Dr. Wolfgang Schäfer-Klug. Their aim was divide and conquer the workers they allegedly represent.

Workers who participated in the meetings spoke of an atmosphere of intimidation, in which questions raised about the future of colleagues in Bochum were dismissed by union officials. Instead, they claimed Opel had promised to provide alternative jobs to the thousands of workers losing their positions.

Nevertheless many workers reported they voted against the sellout deal. They were astonished when they were told the next morning that 84 percent of IGM members at Rüsselsheim and over 90 percent in Kaiserslautern and Dudenhofen had voted in favour of the contract.

"I am surprised they do not say 110 percent," one worker commented sarcastically. "It's all a lie. Who believes that? No one can check. It reminds one of Honecker's election results," he said, referring to the

former Stalinist leader in East Germany who always received election results of just under 100 percent.

At the beginning of Friday's meeting the works council asked the new Opel CEO to address the workforce. Neumann, who had previously organized VW's China business, tried to ingratiate himself with employees. He had "always been an Opel fan". His first car at 18 was an Opel Cadet. His elderly father had just bought a new Opel. Opel is part of his family, etc., etc.

He then thanked the works council and IG Metall for their warm welcome and great the close and trusting cooperation between social partners, i.e., management and unions. After all, Neumann stressed, he had come from VW where such cooperation was standard practice.

The meeting was then addressed by the JWC chairman, Dr Schäfer-Klug. In a one-hour PowerPoint presentation he sought to portray the Master Contract as the beginning of a new "promising future for Opel".

The "Drive! 2022" was a "growth plan that will be continuously developed", he argued, with the aim of increasing Opel's share of the European auto market with brand new models.

Schäfer-Klug did not address the anomaly that his alleged "growth" program began with the closure of the Bochum plant—the first auto factory closing in the country since World War II. Instead, he claimed the agreement ruled out compulsory redundancies up until 2016. In fact, redundancies in Bochum begin in two weeks. The third shift is to be wound down in April with the loss of 700 jobs. Should insufficient numbers of workers leave "voluntarily" after that, they will be laid off at the end of next year. By 2016, an additional 2,000 workers are due to lose their jobs.

Schäfer-Klug spoke in the manner of a direct representative of management. He claimed the Bochum site will be maintained beyond 2016, although no vehicles will be produced. His only fear was that the refusal so far by the Bochum works council to agree to the deal could negatively affect Opel's "commitment" to protect jobs.

IG Metall officials calculated that the passage of the Master Contract by workers in Rüsselsheim and other factories would place extra pressure on workers in Bochum to reconsider their decision and vote in favour.

There are few comparable examples of such a naked appeal by the unions to isolate and blackmail workers at another plant to agree to the closure of their factory. Schäfer-Klug is determined to close the Bochum plant in order to eliminate a "troublesome" workforce with a history of militant struggles, including open rebellions

against the union. If management and the union can successfully close the Bochum plant, they will proceed against workers at Opel's other factories.

It is quite possible that secret talks have taken place between IG Metall and the executives of Volkswagen and Opel. As Europe's largest carmaker, Volkswagen has stressed on many occasions that there are too many auto plants in Europe. It may well be the case that the switch by Karl-Thomas Neumann from VW to Opel is aimed not only at Bochum, but also at decommissioning the company's remaining plants.

The next to speak after Schaefer-Klug was the president of the United Auto Workers in the US, Bob King, who was brought onto the Opel board of directors last year to enforce the interests of the mother company, General Motors, and aid IG Metall in the imposition of sweeping concessions on German workers. In the US, King and the UAW are hated by auto workers for collaborating in the shutdown of GM, Ford and Chrysler plants, slashing the wages of new hires in half and imposing a decade-long freeze on auto workers' wages.

The son of a personnel director at Ford, King embodies the transformation of the UAW into an organization that is entirely hostile to the interests of the workers it allegedly represents. The UAW—which controls a substantial ownership stake at all three of the Detroit-based automakers—functions as a corporatist syndicate and labor police for the companies. In Rüsselsheim, King praised his close and trusting collaboration with IG Metall and stressed that he regarded Schaefer to be an extremely competent and reliable partner.

When the debate began, 10 questions were displayed via PowerPoint, which had supposedly been submitted earlier. Board members took the opportunity to reaffirm their positions with the full support of the works council.

Not a single person on the platform addressed or spoke up on behalf of the company's employees.



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