Germany: IG Metall union stitches up the Opel Bochum workforce

Dietmar Henning
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At two staff meetings on Thursday, workers at the Opel plant in Bochum voted by a large majority (76.1 percent) against the so-called “master contract”. Many workers reacted enthusiastically to the vote against a new contract that seals the closure of their factory. One worker writes on the *Opelanerforum* blog: “Better to die standing than to live on your knees!”

In fact, the IG Metall union and the works council are playing a cynical game.

On February 28, the IG Metall executive headed by Berthold Huber and the Opel general works council under Dr. Wolfgang Schäfer-Klug agreed a “master contract” with the American parent company General Motors and Opel. This prescribes lower wages for all employees, worse working conditions and job losses, as well as the closure of the plant in Bochum.

IG Metall is organising the systematic blackmail and division of the workers. The union has demanded members at all plants except Bochum accept the outcome of the negotiations, and thus the closure of the Bochum plant. Those who reject the Bochum plant closure are undermining all plants, and thus his or her own job, threatened both Hesse IG Metall district leader Armin Schild as well as the general works council chief Schäfer-Klug.

IG Metall held the vote at the main factory in Rüsselsheim before the ballot in Bochum, publishing the result showing more than 90 percent support, a result which many workers regard as completely unreliable.

Because IG Metall and the works council know that the Bochum workers are unwilling to agree to the closure of their own plant, they expressed some criticism of the master contract and spoke out indirectly against its approval in Bochum.

But there is only one IG Metall! The procedure in Bochum was agreed with the IG Metal headquarters in Frankfurt. The vote against the contract in Bochum and the vote for it in Rüsselsheim are both part of a stitch-up being organised by the union. IG Metall wants to retain control over the Bochum workers and prevent them from breaking with the union and engaging in a serious struggle to defend jobs, which they would not control and would be unable to sell out.

Many workers in Bochum recall how Boris Karthaus, the union’s negotiating expert, together with the new district chief Knut Giesler, justified the master contract. Both declared that no more could be achieved. Their arguments were no different from those coming from IG Metall headquarters in Frankfurt and the Opel management, who threatened that a premature rejection of the contract would mean closing the plant at the end of next year.

Knut Giesler has just risen to become the district chief. He comes from the same corrupt stable as his predecessor Oliver Burkhard, who is now working as a personnel director at ThyssenKrupp, where he organises the jobs cuts in return for a seven-figure annual salary. As district chief, Giesler is an employee of the IG Metall executive and is subject to its directives.

He changed his arguments only after consultation with Frankfurt and purely for tactical reasons. Just as the Bochum works council leader Rainer Einenkel, he fears that the likely resistance of Bochum Opel workers would otherwise be directed against the IG Metall and herald a wave of resignations.

While many workers welcomed the “no” vote, and see it as a first step in a serious struggle to defend jobs, IG Metall and the works council see things exactly the opposite. They want to maintain control and prevent an industrial dispute. Some weeks earlier, when shop

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stewards demanded an all-out strike, Einenkel reacted angrily, saying “that’s absolute nonsense, complete rubbish”.

His refusal to organise a fight against the threat of closure has isolated the Bochum workforce. Now the management and IG Metall want to step up the pressure on the Bochum workers, while keeping workers at the other plants quiet. IG Metall is determined to make an example of Bochum.

The most important conclusion to draw from the Bochum vote reads thus: To conduct a serious struggle to defend jobs it is necessary to break with the IG Metall. Action Committees must be formed to discuss and organise the fight. Contact must be made with workers at the other factories, to workers in the public sector such as teachers, and to colleagues in the international auto industry, above all to GM workers in the US.

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