

IG Metall union joins offensive against GM-Opel workers

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One week ago, the executive of the IG Metall trade union unanimously voted in Frankfurt-Main in favor of the so-called “Opel Master Contract”. The agreement seals the closure of the GM-Opel factory in Bochum and involves massive attacks on jobs and wages for employees at all of the company’s locations.

Despite the anti-worker nature of the contract IG Metall boss Berthold Huber welcomed the deal, which he described at the board meeting as the “best solution”. It helped secure jobs and create the conditions “for investment in German sites”, Huber declared.

He described the decision by Bochum Opel workers to vote against the closure of their own plant as very regrettable and “incomprehensible”. As a result of the vote, the Bochum plant had been excluded from the latest contract and employees in Bochum must take the consequences, Huber threatened.

The chairman of the joint works council, Dr. Wolfgang Schäfer-Klug, attacked Bochum Opel workers head on. They had lost all touch with reality, he declared. The crisis in the auto industry and the dramatic decline in sales were realities that nobody could deny. He went on to claim that management had made concessions to the workforce in Bochum.

The deal for Bochum workers was unparalleled, Schäfer-Klug enthused. Workers at other factories closed down by GM during the past 12 years had been unable to “achieve such a result securing workplace and job security”, he said. “It had not been possible to achieve such a deal at Luton (UK) in 2001, Azambuja (Portugal) in 2006 or Antwerp (Belgium) in 2010.”

Schäfer-Klug is a typical example of the modern union hack. His arguments and his arrogance towards the workers are identical to those of top management. The man has never seen a proper job close up, let alone

worked on a production line. A fellow of the social democratic Friedrich Ebert Foundation, he wrote his doctoral thesis on environmentally oriented transport policy, obscurely titled “De-theming and symbolic politics”, and was then hired by the company as adviser to the joint works council.

IG Metall and the joint works council have systematically isolated workers in Bochum and split them off from employees at other locations aimed at enforcing the closure of their factory. Earlier this week an Opel spokesman declared: “In a discussion today with the Bochum works council Opel management reaffirmed the already announced plans to cease auto production at the Bochum plant by the end of 2014.” Gearbox production will be terminated at the end of this year.

The night shift at Bochum’s vehicle production plant is to be axed in a few days time, in early April. There is no real guarantee that the goods distribution section with about 430 employees will be retained as previously promised.

The development at Opel contains important lessons for all workers. It makes it clear that the defense of jobs, wages and working conditions is only possible in an uncompromising struggle against IG Metall and its functionaries inside the factories. In this respect, workers should not be deceived by the criticism of the closure decision and the union leadership by the Bochum works council. Both wings of the union play different roles, but are united on all the substantial questions. The joint works council and the IGM leadership have drafted the master contract in close cooperation with Opel and GM and enforced it at all locations apart from Bochum. For his part, Bochum works council head Rainer Einkenkel has raised criticisms of the union leadership and complains of a

“lack of solidarity”.

Einenkel has at the same time refused to conduct any serious struggle to defend jobs, which could form the basis for solidarity and mutual resistance by all Opel workers. In so doing, he plays into the hands of the joint works council, IGM and management. His assertion that renegotiations could achieve better terms is fraudulent and solely aimed at preventing industrial action. Simultaneously Einenkel sends his emissaries from the works council through the departments and threatens those who seek to fight with endangering negotiations on severance pay.

Many workers are wondering how is it possible that the union and works council function so blatantly against the interests of workers and prevent any serious opposition to the planned plant closure.

The transformation of the unions into organs of management is directly linked to the intensification of the capitalist crisis. The current auto crisis is a direct product of the general attack being carried out against all workers. Five years ago the federal government shoveled 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. Starting with Greece, all of the social gains won in Europe by decades of workers’ struggles are being systematically reversed.

The costs of the international financial crisis are to be passed onto the working class and Opel workers in Bochum are to set a precedent. A workforce with a history of militant struggles is to be brought to its knees. The planned closure—the first by an auto company in Germany since World War II—will trigger a wave of attacks that go far beyond the content of the master contract.

Opel workers must fight back. They must reject the logic of the capitalist market place, which proclaims cutbacks and closures to be inevitable, and uncompromisingly defend the right to work and fair pay.

In our appeal for a “no” vote against the master contract we emphasized that workers cannot permit their hands to be tied by what is or is not possible within the framework of the capitalist profit system. If the company executive and its co-managers in the union headquarters declare that the maintenance of

employment and wages is not possible under current circumstances then they are admitting that the capitalist profit system is incompatible with the most urgent interests and needs of the working population.

Jobs can only be defended on the basis of a political perspective that places the needs of the population above the profit interests of the economy, that is, on the basis of a socialist perspective. Above all, the auto industry demonstrates that such a struggle requires an international strategy and a new socialist party.

The most important task before Opel workers in Bochum and all other workers is to organize independently of the works council and the IG Metall union. It is necessary to establish an action committee to make contact with employees at all other factories in Germany and abroad in preparation for a sit-in strike.



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