

Bochum Opel plant to close

Ulrich Rippert
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The supervisory board of GM-Opel decided on Wednesday to close its plant in Bochum, Germany. Production at the 50-year-old factory, which in its heyday employed up to 20,000 workers, will terminate at the end of 2014. Around 3,000 workers will lose their jobs, and an estimated 40,000 ancillary jobs in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia will also be affected. The closure at Bochum is the first such closure of a German auto plant since the end of the Second World War.

So far, no details on the votes of individual supervisory board members have emerged. However, it can be safely assumed that the chair of the joint works council, Dr. Schäfer Klug, and representatives of IG Metall agreed to the closure decision. They had previously helped draw up the so-called Master Plan, which involved the closure of the Bochum plant. They then went on to publicly defend the plan and viciously attack workers at Bochum who refused to sign up for the closure.

Now, the company has turned its threat into reality and will close the factory in 2014, instead of two years later as it originally promised. According to the company, there is still no final decision on the relocation of production of the Zafira model, which is currently built in Bochum.

Bochum works council chairman Rainer Einenkel, who had publicly rejected the “Master Plan”, addressed a number of media outlets on Wednesday and made clear that he has no intention of fighting the closure of the plant. He is a key player in the frame-up worked out by the company executive, IG Metall trade union and its affiliated joint works council.

In an interview with Deutschland Radio, Einenkel declared: “If I were an employee in Rüsselsheim or chair of the works council in Rüsselsheim [the main factory and headquarters of Opel in Germany] I would have definitely voted in favour of the contract.”

One can also interpret his statement as follows: If the company executive had decided to close one of its other plants in Eisenach, Rüsselsheim or Kaiserslautern, instead of Bochum, then Einenkel would have supported the decision.

This is more than a hypothesis: when Opel closed its plant in Antwerp, Belgium three years ago, Einenkel gave his tacit support to the decision. He held talks at the time with North Rhine-Westphalian premier Jürgen Rüttgers to win parts of the Belgian production for Bochum. Both men then commented on the plant closure in Belgium with the words: “We are very pleased that the Bochum site remains secure.”

Solidarity from the mouth of Einenkel is just as hollow as the similar declarations made by other IGM officials. He completely rules out a common struggle by all workers at all locations to defend jobs.

If he sat in the seat of Schäfer-Klug, Einenkel would also have signed the deal to close down the Bochum site, which in turn involves attacks on conditions for workers at other plants.

Deutschland Radio then asked, “Do you regret the lack of solidarity with Bochum on the part of workers from other Opel plants in Germany?” Einenkel spoke of a “difficult situation because there are too many auto factories in Europe”. That makes it “very easy for management to play off factories and workforces against one another.”

In fact, it is the unions and works councils that are responsible for creating divisions within the company workforce in order to suppress all opposition. In January, when one shop steward proposed striking for a week instead of toothless strikes for a few hours, Einenkel was outraged and reprimanded him with the words, “This is absolute nonsense, absolute nonsense.”

Einenkel took over as head of the Bochum works council following spontaneous strikes in 2004. At that time, more than 10,000 people worked at the Bochum

plant. Since then, he has played the main role in permitting management to massively reduce the workforce without too much resistance.

He has repeatedly claimed that the future of the factory could only be secured on the basis of further concessions. He consoled workers with the prospect of negotiations that either never took place or led to further concessions. At the same time, he claimed that those who sought to organise action were endangering any future social plan and severance payments.

Now this policy has been played out to the end. Einenkel's current aim is an "orderly liquidation" of the plant based on a social plan with severance arrangements before he retires.

Einenkel is a typical representative of the German system of social partnership and co-management participation, and embodies the transformation that has taken place in the trade unions over the years. During a period of economic upturn, the union policy of class collaboration yielded certain social improvements for workers, but now these bureaucrats are reduced to nothing less than co-managers enforcing the interests of their "own" factory/company against global competitors and against their own workforce.

As a young man, Eienenkel was a member of a Stalinist youth movement and later the Stalinist German Communist Party (DKP). Today, he cooperates closely with the Left Party, which in turn maintains close relations with the trade union bureaucracy and defends it against all criticism from the ranks of workers. The Left Party considers the bureaucratic trade union apparatus, with its thousands of full-time functionaries, as an important instrument for the defense of the capitalist order.

Workers must take the fight against plant closure into their own hands. The defence of jobs in Bochum or any other factory cannot be subordinated to the principle of company competitiveness. Employment on the basis of a decent wage is a fundamental right and must take priority over the drive to maximise profits.



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