

UAW chief stabs German Opel workers in the back

Jerry White
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United Auto Workers President Bob King last week called on workers at General Motors' Opel factory in Bochum, Germany to vote again on a concessions-laden contract that they rejected by a 3-to-1 margin in late March. The workers at the complex defied strong-arming by their union, IG Metall, and opposed the Master Agreement for all German Opel plants. The agreement was ratified nationally, however.

It imposed a wage freeze and other givebacks on 20,000 workers throughout the country, while pledging to keep the Bochum complex open until 2016, after which production would be closed down and only logistics and components facilities would remain open, eliminating 1,800 of 3,000 jobs.

In March of 2012, King was appointed to Opel's supervisory board, where he sits alongside representatives of IG Metall. Using the sharp reduction in labor costs the UAW helped impose on US auto workers as a benchmark, King is now attempting to employ the methods of the American trade union bureaucracy—forcing workers to vote repeatedly until they “get it right”—to impose the dictates of the company.

In the face of the economic disaster gripping the continent, car sales have plummeted and GM, Ford and other companies are losing hundreds of millions of euros in the European market. This stands in sharp contrast to the billions in profits they are making in North America as a result of the plant closings, layoffs and concessions agreed to by the UAW as part of President Obama's 2009 restructuring of the auto industry. This included a 50 percent reduction in wages for all new, so-called “tier-two,” workers, which allowed GM to make \$5 billion in profits despite large European losses and give its CEO, Dan Akerson, a 44 percent raise to \$11.1 million.

The Bochum closure—the first auto plant shutdown in Germany since World War II—is part of the plans by the global auto makers to sharply reduce “overcapacity” in Europe, i.e., close at least 20 assembly plants and dozens of other factories, employing an estimated 115,000 workers.

IG Metall has agreed to the closure and management's plans to ratchet up the exploitation of the remaining Opel workers in Germany, while shifting production to lower wage countries in Eastern Europe such as Poland, where workers at Opel's state of the art plant in Gliwice make one-sixth the wages of their counterparts in Bochum.

In the face of growing opposition from auto workers across Europe, IG Metall has carried out a systematic campaign to isolate the Bochum workers and block any common struggle by workers throughout Germany and Europe. IG Metall pushed through the Master Contract at the other Opel factories with the bogus claim that it would guarantee new car models and job security. The workers at Bochum rejected the IG Metall's worthless promises that a ratification of the deal would secure some production and keep the plant open with a reduced staff until 2016.

After the Bochum workers rejected the contract, GM-Opel announced it would close the entire complex—which once employed 20,000 workers and up to 10,000 at the beginning of the last decade—by the end of 2014. Officials from IG Metall and the joint works council denounced the workers' “no” vote as “incomprehensible.” IG Metall Chairman Berthold Huber told the workers they would have to face the consequences.

Around 3,000 workers will lose their jobs, and an estimated 40,000 related jobs in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia will also be affected.

According to the US industry web site *Automotive News*, King has urged IG Metall to pressure workers to hold another vote. “I would really hate to see that plant closed when so much effort was put in by IG Metall and the works council to save it,” King told the publication. Referring to a revote, he added, “I’m hoping if I talk about how that’s one of the things that happened in the US, that maybe the (Bochum) workers will do that. I don’t know if that’s possible, but at least that would open up a door of opportunity for people to talk.”

King reportedly cited as a model for a deal at Bochum the virtual slaves’ charter the UAW pushed through at the Spring Hill, Tennessee factory in 2011 in order to convince GM to restart assembly production at the plant. The “landmark” contract included “innovative staffing arrangements” that lifted the cap on the number of lower-paid, tier-two workers, allowing the company to move towards a workforce consisting entirely of employees receiving the near-poverty wage of \$14-15 an hour, or half the traditional wage.

The deal also allowed on-site suppliers to use non-GM workers, paid as little as \$9 an hour, to produce sub-assembly parts, saving the company the cost of transporting parts. Current, higher-paid workers were given the ultimatum of accepting a 50 percent wage cut, transferring to another GM plant, often hundreds of miles away, or “voluntarily” quitting.

In general, the 2011 contract agreed to by the UAW, which cut pensions and other past economic gains, limited labor cost increases to 1 percent, the smallest increase in 40 years. Welcoming the ratification of the contract, King praised President Obama for “keeping good-paying jobs in America” and added that the UAW was “determined to work together with GM management to grow jobs in the US.”

In addition, to aiding IG Metall in betraying the Opel workers and protecting the interests of GM, King is looking to get help from the IG Metall bureaucrats in unionizing German-owned factories in the US South, particularly the new Volkswagen plant in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

The UAW’s repeated offers to ensure foreign-based auto makers the same “success” its collaboration with the Detroit auto makers has produced have thus far failed to bear fruit. The union bureaucracy has not

succeeding in landing an agreement that would allow it to collect dues from VW workers, who are among the lowest paid auto workers in the US.

King & Co. are hoping that IG Metall, which enjoys close and thoroughly corrupt relations with VW management, will back its efforts. Last month, IG Metall Chairman Huber said in a letter that hourly workers at VW’s plant should pick the UAW to represent them. “The UAW doesn’t have a better advocate than Berthold Huber,” King told *Automotive News*.

The collaboration of the UAW and IG Metall against auto workers around the world underscores the reactionary nature of these organizations, which, by virtue of their pro-capitalist and nationalist programs, have long since ceased to represent workers. They are themselves businesses, in the case of UAW controlling billions in corporate stock.

In opposition to the attack on jobs and living standards by the global auto makers and the labor syndicates with which they are allied, auto workers in Germany and the US should forge the closest international ties and develop new forms of organization completely independent of the unions and big business politicians. The only answer to the demand that workers pay for the world capitalist crisis is the development of a political movement of the working class armed with an international socialist program to reorganize economic life to meet human needs, not private profit.



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