

# Germany: Opel Bochum workers denounce union sellout

Our correspondents

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The mood at Gate 4 of the Adam Opel plant in Bochum is tense. Just six weeks after the workforce voted down the company's Master Contract, which involves the closure of the factory, workers are angry and indignant.

Next to a parking lot, a small group of workers has assembled prior to commencing their shift.

When asked about their situation they respond: "They totally tricked us." Another worker agrees. "First they failed to inform us, then they deliberately deceived us."

The men were referring neither to Opel management nor to its parent company, General Motors, from which they had heard "only lies and empty promises for years". They were referring to the IG Metall (IGM) trade union.

"For 15 years, they pressured us to accept one concession after another," said one worker and cited numbers. "When I look back at the last ten years I have lost a total of between 50,000 and 70,000 euros."

A colleague nods in agreement. "First of all, you sacrifice 1.25 percent of your salary to secure the factory. Then you waive 60 percent of your Christmas bonus to encourage the company to take on young people. Then we have to make more sacrifices to prevent layoffs. Then, after all this, you have to forfeit holiday payments. And what do we have at the end of it...?"

"Berthold Huber [the head of IG Metall] is a criminal in my eyes. He and his clique have betrayed us and sold us out," one worker declares and wins approval from all sides.

One day earlier, protest strikes took place in Hesse, Rhineland-Palatinate, Saarland and Thuringia. "Do you think anyone told us about it? Solidarity for the IG Metall trade union is an alien concept," says one, adding: "One hour strikes are a joke!"

This was already clear in the way in which the vote on the Master Contract had been organised. "Our colleagues from other plants were not able to see the entire contract, only a note with their production commitments," says one worker. Opel workers in the company's other plants in Rüsselsheim, Kaiserslautern and Eisenach would not have known that they were signing a death warrant for Bochum. "The IGM is consciously dividing us," says Andreas, who works in logistics.

It is a mixture of bitterness, disappointment and anger that prevails at the factory gates. And it is not just directed against the union leadership.

"The works council has betrayed us, just like IG Metall," says a painter who has worked at the plant for 30 years. "They met with management several times in Frankfurt and said nothing about what had been negotiated behind closed doors."

Other workers were of the same opinion. "Einenkel [the head of the Bochum works council] has no doubt struck a deal a long time in advance, but he tells us nothing." They suspect there was a secret deal struck between the works council and management.

A worker of nearly 60 years stops by his car. "I am no longer affected," he says, alluding to his age, "But the young ones have their whole lives ahead of them. They need someone on their side who fights for them and does not let them down, as the council has done."

A fitter at the factory gives names: "We have seen nothing of Schäfer-Klug [chair of the company joint works council] for weeks. And Einenkel has simply done nothing." A young colleague intervenes: "Einenkel has long since accepted the closure of the plant! The only thing is he tells us something else."

Half an hour later, workers from the early shift began to leave the factory. A meeting organised by the works

council had taken place two hours previously. Many of the workers had declined to attend. “What should we expect of them?” they asked.

Others had taken part. When asked what was discussed, they shrug their shoulders. “Excuses, as always....” “Delaying tactics,” other workers retorted. Einkenkel repeatedly refers to “negotiations”, now to take place finally at the local level. However, many are sure: all the discussions revolve around closing the plant at the end of 2014. The web site for Opel workers reports that it was not possible to raise critical standpoints at the meeting.

“Many just want to get out here,” says an Opel worker. An older worker relates how many of his colleagues had become ill due to the dramatically increased workload. A 55-year-old assembly worker describes how he has to cover about 10 kilometres per shift in order to fulfill his workload.

A young worker comes up and surprises all those present with the news that he had been taken on by the company two days ago. The details are revealing: the company management must employ temporary staff because of the high level of absenteeism. The young man is a temporary worker and earns €8.19 per hour.

“Life here has nothing to do with what most of us have imagined when we started work 30 or 40 years ago,” said one worker.

A team of Socialist Equality Party (PSG) supporters distributed a leaflet that described how American United Auto Workers head Bob King intervened in the conflict over the Bochum plant, calling upon workers to vote again, this time in favour of the Master Contract. The article by Jerry White from the *World Socialist Web Site* hit the mark. On this point all agree. None of the workers are prepared to revise their “no vote... If it came to a second vote, then the no vote would be even greater than the first time,” says one, and earns general agreement.

“What would you propose we do concretely in this situation?” was the question posed by some workers who had read the leaflet and were informed by the PSG team on the socialist perspective of the party.

Workers had long discussed how to conduct resistance. “If we strike, we are alone. The IGM will not support us,” says one. “Nor will the works council,” another adds. Several workers pointed out the financial losses involved in a strike.

They react cautiously to the proposal that they take their fate into their own hands and establish independent factory groups and grassroots committees. They knew very well that if they sought to fight for their interests, they must inevitably do so in opposition to IG Metall and the works council.

“The last few months have worn down many of us,” a younger fitter says almost apologetically, “But I am telling you, your leaflets are widely available and are being hotly debated.”



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