Works council in Bochum seeks to stifle opposition to GM-Opel plant closing

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After employees at the GM-Opel plant in Bochum, in western Germany rejected the company's so-called master contract in late March, workers have been continually barraged by misinformation aimed at preventing any independent struggle. The Bochum local works council, acutely aware of the growing anger of workers at the announced closure of their plant, halted production for almost four hours Tuesday afternoon to hold an "information meeting" at Gate 1 of the factory.

The meeting was conducted by the chairman of the local works council, Rainer Einenkel. He complained that management was not providing "clear information" about their plans. He also complained that the company had failed to give binding commitments for severance packages and replacement jobs for employees.

Einenkel's shows of indignation were met with a mixture of anger and indifference by workers. Only a few hundred workers gathered at midday in front of the factory. Many of the early shift workers went home without bothering to stop. Most workers arriving for the late shift also proceeded to their work stations.

The plant manager, Manfred Gellrich, refused to respond to an appeal to come out and answer questions. Instead Einenkel and other works council members went inside the building and spoke briefly with representatives of management who were "ready to answer any questions", but did not want to discuss publicly at the factory gate due to "ongoing negotiations".

Since the end of March, the works council has been involved in negotiations with management over the elimination of approximately 1,200 of the 3,300 jobs at the Bochum plant, which are due to be shed this year. The talks are not about retaining jobs, but rather the manner in which the factory will close, the design of a "social plan" and the amount of severance pay for sacked workers.

Although Einenkel complains that the IG Metall (the union that organizes the workers at Opel) leadership is "mudslinging" against him, he is part of the conspiracy against workers organized by the works councils, trade unions, political parties, Opel and its parent company General Motors.

Their actions during the last few months have been developed long in advance and are aimed at paralyzing Bochum workers. The Opel plant at Bochum will be the first auto plant closed in Germany since World War II. It is, however, only one of many targeted for closure by the global auto companies seeking to sharply reduce capacity and labor costs and make the working class pay for the European slump.

Einenkel has postured as an opponent of the plant closing and the Master Contract. Behind the scenes, however, he has already accepted the closure and is only looking to dissipate opposition with promises of severance packages and "alternate" jobs.

Tuesday, the same day as the plant meeting was held, Alexander Bazio, an Opel spokesman at the Bochum plant, announced that the Logistics Unit, a parts distribution center employing 430, will remain open until 2016 to fulfill a contract with Neovia Logistics Services LLC. A sense of the anger among auto workers at the plant no doubt plays no small part in the calculations of management.

At the end of March, the workforce in Bochum rejected the master contract drawn up by the IG Metall leadership and Opel board, which envisaged the closure of the Bochum plant by the end of 2016. Shortly afterwards, the Opel board announced that production of the Zafira model van in Bochum would cease at the

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end of 2014.

Chairman of the American UAW (United Auto Workers) Bob King, who sits as an employee representative on the Opel Supervisory Board, then demanded that Bochum workers vote again on the contract they had previously voted down.

This initiative was supported by the IG Metall and its representatives at the Bochum plant, including the works council steward Horst Roch, who, like Einenkel, sits on the company joint works council. In the local press, they implied that many Bochum workers supported a new vote on the contract. The district head of IG Metall, Knut Giesler, claimed his union “had been approached by many members at Opel who now have a different interpretation of the outcome of negotiations.”

Boris Karthaus, spokesman for the IGM in the city of Dusseldorf, and Dr. Wolfgang Schäfer-Klug, the chair of the joint works council distributed leaflets in the Bochum alleging that the Bochum workforce had not been properly informed by Einenkel on the consequences of rejecting the master contract and the various offers made by Opel.

Meanwhile, the *Ruhrnachrichten* newspaper has revealed that the Opel group is backpedalling on the offers it was alleged to have made according to Schäfer-Klug and Karthaus. “The content does not correspond to the last offer made at the vote on the contract”, declared Personnel Director Ralph Wangemann.

Following the failure of IG Metall to force Bochum workers to undertake a new vote on the contract, Opel announced last week that production of the Zafira model van would go ahead in 2015 at Opel’s main plant in Rüsselsheim. Schäfer-Klug is chairman of the works council there. In a leaflet Einenkel then called this announcement “an incredible provocation”.

In his current information sheet, Einenkel recalls that the Opel Supervisory Board had already revised the decision to build the Zafira up to 2016 in Bochum as early as April 17, 2013. But Einenkel reacted at that time in his usual manner, i.e. by exploring whether legal measures were possible. He hoped as ever for “a rational economic decision” and that the closure of the Bochum plant would “not be implemented” in 2014.

With his constant stonewalling, his appeals that workers place their trust in negotiations, and his vehement opposition to any effective struggle, Einenkel has played a criminal role. He has headed the Bochum works council for nearly nine years since his election in December 2004, after the IG Metall had strangled the week-long strike by Bochum workers in October of the same year. Since then, nearly 7,000 of the more than 10,000 jobs at Bochum have been axed, without any opposition by the union.

Einenkel is a prime example of the transformation undergone by the unions. They always defended capitalism, but during the postwar boom they were also able to win certain social improvements for their members. Today, in the face of globalization and the world crisis of capitalism, they function as co-managers pledged to defending the interests of the corporations against their international competitors and against their own workforce.

Bochum Opel workers must take the fight against plant closure into their own hands through the formation of rank-and-file committee that will appeal to auto workers in Germany, Europe and the US to wage a common struggle to defend jobs and living standards.

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