

German Socialist Equality Party campaign wins support among Opel workers in Rüsselsheim

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The Socialist Equality Party (PSG) in Germany is currently collecting signatures to gain ballot status for the general election due in September. Last Saturday, a campaign team was in Rüsselsheim, south of Frankfurt. The town of about 60,000 inhabitants is the site of the original Opel auto manufacturing works, now a subsidiary of General Motors.

There is a saying here: “If Opel coughs, Rüsselsheim get the flu.” The town has felt the full force of the crisis gripping the auto industry. The town’s debts have forced it to seek aid from the state government, and residents fear for their jobs and public facilities, such as the Municipal Theatre, the town library, the swimming pool and the music school.

Opel recently announced the closure of its plant in Bochum, some 150 miles northwest. This is the first auto plant in Germany to be shut down since World War II. Auto workers, organized by the IG Metall trade union, are angry that the union has collaborated with management to prevent any struggle against the plant closure and wage cuts.

The residential area of Dicker Busch II, where the PSG team began collecting signatures, is home to numerous Opel workers and their families, which is why the PSG team also distributed the current edition of the party’s Auto-worker Newsletter. This district is also affected by the crisis: Several stores, including the branch of the Schlecker drug store chain, the Walter Köbel Sports Hall and the district administrative office are threatened with closure.

Those that have stayed here represent an international cross-section of nationalities: in addition to those born in the city, there are newcomers from northern Hesse and former East Germany, there are also many from Turkey, Poland, Italy, Tunisia, Morocco, Ethiopia and other countries. Almost everyone has one or more Opel workers in the family or among their friends.

Many signed up to support ballot status for the Socialist Equality Party. “For us, it doesn’t matter whether it’s the Christian Democrats or Social Democrats that win the elections,” one often hears said. “They don’t represent ordinary workers.” Almost all those who spoke to the campaign team expressed their dismay at the closure of Opel Bochum in the Ruhr Area, and many are outraged that the IG Metall union has not only accepted closure but helped to organize it.

Leila finds it “really tough” that Opel Bochum is to close. “More than three thousand workers are affected.” Her father, now a

pensioner, worked at Opel for thirty years. She too, worked there for about a year.

Asked about the role of IG Metall, Leila says, “one would really expect a trade union to stand on the side of workers. It’s right that people are now leaving the IG Metall, it has it coming. Workers have to unite worldwide, across national borders, to defend their rights.”

“I resigned from the IG Metall”, Mo tells us. He has worked for twenty years in the Opel service centre. “I did my apprenticeship there. I quit the union because we have only seen wage cuts for twenty years. Even if things go well, we never get a share of the profits. Only the managers benefit, and of course, the top works council representatives.”

Mo is particularly bitter that IG Metall ensured its own members received a bonus, but not the rest of the workforce.

Mo says, “It’s almost exclusively temporary workers who are now employed on the production line. Although they don’t earn quite as little as one now hears about Mercedes temps. They get between twelve and fifteen euros per hour. But they only have a temporary contract for six months.”

Many workers confirm that numerous subcontractors are providing staff, and each of them pays a different rate. Employees are subject to varying conditions, working side by side.

Mo reports that some workers employed by an outside company in the delivery department “have very poor wages. They can be fired on the spot for being sick. No union is looking out for them.” He himself had colleagues who worked for this company but then quit.

“In the past, we all worked for Opel”, adds Gunter, an older worker. He has been there 37 years, and works in development. “We were once a workforce of 43,000 at Opel! Today, it’s just a third of that. It started with contract workers in 2000, when the new plant was built, until then, we did it all ourselves.”

Asked about the closure in Bochum, Mo says this was a conscious decision taken against the Bochum workers. “What they are doing with Bochum is really harsh. The workers there have always been obstinate. I like that. They take to the barricades when something is wrong, and they are right to do so. Opel wants to resolve the crisis on the backs of these colleagues.”

Mo continues, “In Europe, people no longer buy cars because they aren’t earning enough. In Greece, Cyprus and Italy people

cannot afford to buy cars. Previously, a lot of Opel cars were bought in Spain, for example. But how can people afford that today?"

Dagmar too has had bitter experiences with Opel. Her husband has worked at the car company for many years, formerly in three-shift operations, until he had a heart attack.

"Opel workers here have gone without a wage increase for years," says Dagmar. "In the past, you could live quite well on an Opel wage. Today, workers must apply for social assistance just to get by. It is really sad when a worker can't feed his family from his own labour."

Dagmar also has nothing good to say about the unions. "The IG Metall has switched sides," she says. "It's no longer a union for the workers. They agree to everything, say yes and amen, and look after themselves. If I were elected by the workers, I would have to look after the workers, and not do the employer's bidding."

It's been like this for twenty years, says Dagmar. "The workers all together must do something against that. If workers were to stick together, something different than what the IG Metall wishes would certainly be done."

WSWS journalists inquired of many workers if they had terminated their membership in the IG Metall. A works council representative who does not belong to the IG Metall confirmed that he had been approached by "more than ten workers" in the last two weeks who all wanted to leave the IG Metall. The main reason for the dissatisfaction is apparently the way the IG Metall wheels and deals with the management and with General Motors [Opel's owner], in order to restructure the company and reduce costs on the backs of workers and increase production.

Opel's works council chair Wolfgang Schäfer-Klug has helped elaborate and enforce the company's so-called master contract. This includes the closure of the Bochum plant, where 3,800 jobs will be destroyed, as well as wage cuts and harsher working conditions for the workforce at the other sites.

The IG Metall works council representatives put the master contract to the vote at all Opel plants. Although many shop stewards had said they would reject the contract, according to the IG Metall leadership, it was accepted by a majority in Rüsselsheim, Eisenach and Kaiserslautern. Many workers doubt the result. Witnesses from Rüsselsheim report that the IG Metall leaders had taken away the ballot boxes after the vote, and counted the ballots by hand without any third-party oversight.

The WSWS also spoke with Mehmet, a Turkish worker who has just resigned from the IG Metall. "I am one of many," he said. "Several of my colleagues have cancelled their IG Metall membership now." He described how workers are being blackmailed with unemployment. "We are constantly told to work faster, but there's just not enough money. We are told to go without, because the company is supposedly losing money. This apparently has no effect on the privileges of the works council representatives, however."

The former works council chair allowed himself to be ferried around in a fully-loaded expensive Opel Insignia Sport model after he had negotiated a major contract. For years, Opel workers received the collectively-negotiated wage increase a year later than other metal workers. For example, the wage increase from last

year will come into force from 1 June 2013, and the newly-agreed 3.4 percent increase will only apply to Opel workers from 1 May 2014. For a few years until 2011, Opel workers had to do without part of their Christmas bonus and holiday pay.

Schäfer-Klug had expressly announced that the central works council would not approve any more wage cuts unless all plants were permanently secured. That has proven to be a sham. The Bochum plant is now set to close in 2014, and workers are still being forced to give up various components of their wages.

As Mehmet and others related, the work has become more stressful and therefore more dangerous. Accidents are increasing, although statistics do not reveal the true picture. Minor accidents are covered up. Mehmet described how he and other coworkers experienced this. "You get sent to the infirmary and are supposed to wait until the shift is over, without being sent to the doctor. Just no absenteeism." This way, the company saves contributions to the social insurance scheme against occupational accidents, which are paid according to the number of sick days.

More and more employees, observed Mehmet, are no longer given a permanent contract, but are employed by outside firms which pay much worse. He believes that of about 14,000 production workers, "only about half are part of the permanent workforce. The new recruits are almost all from outside companies."

Some of them not only have very low wages, but also often work two shifts in a row, without it being officially registered. "It's also difficult for us permanent staff to make ends meet," said Mehmet. He has six children and needs a large apartment, for which he must pay €1,100 a month. "The money often only lasts till the twentieth of the month."

Mehmet has worked out what his wages were worth 22 years ago, when he had just started at Opel in the early 1990s compared to what he earns today. For comparison, he has converted the money into gasoline. "Back then, you got more than 7,700 litres of gasoline for five thousand Deutschmarks. Today, I could get only 1,800 litres of gasoline for my entire salary, which is not even a quarter. Where's the rest gone?"



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