

German Left Party supports union betrayals of workers

Dietmar Henning
24 July 2013

On July 13, the Left Party in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia held a "Trade Union Policy Conference" at the IG Metall union headquarters in Gelsenkirchen.

Gelsenkirchen is located in the middle of the Ruhr region, less than 20 kilometers from Bochum. The imminent shutdown of the GM-Opel factory in Bochum will be the first closure of a German car plant since the end of World War II. The IG Metall (IGM) union and its affiliated works councils are playing a key role in carrying through the closure of the plant in the face of opposition from Opel workers.

Under these conditions, the Left Party has sprung to the aid of IG Metall and the works councils.

The conference in Gelsenkirchen was meant to assure IGM, and all other unions, of the Left Party's total support. "We regard the unions as our primary partners", said Bernd Riexinger, the former Verdi (United Services Union) secretary in Stuttgart and current national chairman of the Left Party.

In his welcoming speech, Gelsenkirchen IGM spokesman Robert Sadowsky defended the policies of the union, declaring, "We have no way of stopping the layoffs". Sadowsky is typical of trade union officials who are simultaneously functionaries of the Left Party. He criticises the anti-social policies of the corporations, but then argues that nothing can be done.

He told the Left Party conference of a meeting of some 250 employees of TRW Automotive that had taken place at the IGM headquarters the day before. The auto supplier produces steering systems for Ford, Opel, Peugeot, and Citroen and had record sales in 2012.

Despite the high sales volume, Sadowsky told the conference, 150 of 700 TRW jobs were to be eliminated. The TRW workforce had given up €40 million in wages since 2004 as a result of deals

concluded between IGM and management. Yet the company demanded new wage cuts of 15 percent. This was rejected by the TRW workers.

When participants at the conference responded to the workers' defiance with applause, Sadowsky said: "Stop the clapping." The workers' stand would mean a loss of jobs, he declared.

In other words, the TRW workers were to blame for their own sacking because they had turned down further wage cuts. This was the same line of argument used by IGM at Opel in Bochum. There, according to the union, the workforce's "no" to the so-called master agreement had guaranteed the final closure of the plant by the end of 2014.

Sadowsky, who receives a salary as a member of the company supervisory board in addition to his ample salary as a spokesman for IG Metall, was formerly IGM's collective agreements secretary in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW). He was instrumental in the development and implementation of the Framework for the Reforming of Tariff Agreements (ERA). This led to a sharp reduction of employees' wages. "The new ERA collective agreement will bring a renaissance in industrial trade union activity", wrote Sadowsky in 2004.

The Left Party's Riexinger sought to portray the unions as victims of the expansion of temporary employment, contract work, part-time and low-wage jobs. He thus turned reality on its head. The unions are not victims of these trends, they are complicit in them.

Silke Zimmer, the head of Verdi's trade division in North Rhine-Westphalia, said retail employees have not been engaging in collective struggles for higher wages or better working conditions for years. Instead, they have been confronted with constant attacks by the companies.

Employers in Hamburg were currently demanding monthly wage cuts of €382 (\$502), while those in NRW expected reductions in line with the financial situation as well as general cuts in the wages of part-time workers.

Zimmer reported, for example, that employees at the Karstadt department store chain agreed to forgo €650 million (\$854 million) in wages over the last eight years—a waiver negotiated and signed by Verdi and the works councils. The investor Nicolas Berggruen, Zimmer said, had always assured the staff he did not want to cut wages further. But now they were to be greatly reduced.

"In other words", said Zimmer, "the Karstadt employees have been tricked". What she did not say was that Verdi and the works council had hailed Berggruen as a saviour and continue to collaborate with him to this day.

Ute Lawrence, GEW teachers' union spokesperson for tariff policy in NRW, explained why it was supposedly impossible for non-civil servant teachers to be employed on the same basis as their civil servant colleagues. She said that since the other unions involved in collective bargaining—Verdi and the Civil Service Federation (DBB)—"naturally" concluded tariff agreements with the employers and divided the teachers, the GEW had little means of securing the interests of non-civil servant teachers.

She did not mention that GEW officially approved the last tariff agreement, enforced it despite the protests of union members, and thereby abandoned the fight for equal pay and conditions for civil servant and non-civil servant teachers. Nevertheless, she drew applause from the Left Party audience.

At the end of the meeting, Murat Yaman, deputy works council chairman at Opel in Bochum, related how the works council had accepted "compromises" for years in order to "guarantee the plant's continuance". Several times, he euphemistically referred to this as "contributions to the restructuring of staff". In 2004, some 10,000 workers were still employed in Bochum; there are currently just 3,300.

The result of the council's agreeing to savage wage cuts and the continual elimination of jobs is the looming closure of the plant and layoff of the remaining workers.

According to Yaman, the works council declared

again and again in recent meetings of the conciliation panel that it was still willing to compromise. He said it had issued a multi-page document advising how jobs could be created.

He then indicated that the works council did not intend to seriously oppose the closure. "We continue to negotiate in the conciliation panel," he declared. "Next week, there will be a top-level meeting with the company's chief executives or the human resources management board."

His remarks outlined the division of labor between IG Metall and the works council. While IG Metall cooperates openly with Opel and General Motors to prepare the closure of the Bochum plant, the works council keeps the workers in check and suppresses any serious struggle to defend jobs.

The meeting made clear that the unions and works councils are playing a key role in the attacks on workers being carried out by companies and state employers. In the face of growing opposition among workers, the Left Party's role is to help undermine resistance and shore up the union bureaucrats.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact