

Germany: Socialism and the fight against the GM-Opel shutdown

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Approximately 3,300 workers at Opel's Bochum factory are currently making political experiences which are of great significance for the entire working class. In order to defend their jobs it is necessary to take up an uncompromising struggle against the trade unions, break with the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and Left Party, and build a new revolutionary party.

Bochum is a warning of what is to come. For the first time in Germany since the end of World War II, a whole auto plant is being closed down. The international company management of General Motors in Detroit and Opel's directors in Rüsselsheim are working in close collaboration with the IG Metall trade union and the works councils. The details of the shutdown were worked out in the head offices of IG Metall in Frankfurt.

One year ago, IG Metall head Berthold Huber presented the so-called Germany Plan, together with the head of Opel's central works council Dr. Wolfgang Schäfer-Klug. The trade union's own reorganisation plan for Opel stated that everything had to be done to achieve "a strengthening of the Opel brand." IG Metall's "Germany Plan" contained unprecedented rationalisation measures, including the destruction of jobs, cuts to social spending and wage reductions.

The company's directors welcomed the initiative, but demanded still more cuts and the closure of one of the company plants. The selection was discussed closely with the trade unions. The leadership of IG Metall suggested Bochum. The combative workforce in the city in Germany's Ruhr area, who had previously conducted several strikes against the will of the trade unions, had long been seen as a thorn in the side of the union. The closure of the Bochum plant was aimed at breaking auto workers' resistance and forcing through massive cost-cutting and the destruction of jobs at other plants, in the supplier industry and beyond.

After the decision to close the plant had been reached, IG Metall organised the systematic isolation of the workforce in Bochum. This was the purpose of the "Master Contract." Opel employees at other locations were given vague promises of future investment to secure their support for a wage agreement which had at its centre the closure of the Bochum plant.

When the Bochum workers refused to accept this, they were denounced and attacked by IG Metall officials and the heads of the works councils at the other plants. As punishment, the closure was brought forward to the end of next year.

The Bochum works council and its chairman Rainer Einenkel played a particularly repugnant role in the backroom deal. He feigned a willingness to back a struggle, but always sought to demobilize workers, criticising those who wanted to fight as hotheads who endangered talks on a "social plan," (i.e., measures to cushion the impact of the closure) while suppressing any genuine resistance. The Left Party backed Einenkel, who is a party member, and the SPD supported the activities of the trade union.

GM-Opel workers in Bochum confront a downright conspiracy of company management, trade union and works council supported by all the official political parties. To combat this, a political perspective that rejects the logic of capitalism and adopts a socialist program is required.

This is the significance of the election campaign of the PSG (Socialist Equality Party). As a candidate for the PSG, I appeal to all Opel workers and other workers and young people who are not prepared to accept without a fight the elimination of jobs and the basic conditions of life for thousands of families.

Events in Bochum must be understood in their wider social context. I decisively reject the demoralised claim of the works council that nothing can be done in the face of the international economic crisis and its impact on the auto industry, apart from begging for handouts in negotiations over a social plan.

Opel workers are not alone. Far from it! All over the world, millions of workers confront the same problems. The closure of Opel's Bochum plant is part of a social counter-revolution, which is currently being imposed across Europe and throughout the world. The ruling financial aristocracy and the German government are using the global economic crisis to roll back all of the social concessions that they were compelled to accept in the post-World War II period due to the existence of the Soviet Union.

Those who want to know where this journey leads should look to Detroit. In the former "auto capital of the world," the

full extent of the decline and failure of capitalism can be seen. The city's financial manager, who was elected by no one, applied in the past few days for bankruptcy, in order to secure the billions of dollars of city debts for the big banks and financial speculators. Bankruptcy laws will override contractual rights, with wage contracts declared invalid, and pension obligations and healthcare benefits reduced or in doubt as a whole. Public services, from street lighting, to water treatment, energy provision, public transport as well as the Detroit Zoo may be privatised. The world famous art collection of the Detroit Institute of Arts is threatened with sell-off.

The historic decline of America's motor city is closely connected with the transformation of the United Auto Workers (UAW) trade union. For more than three decades, the union has suppressed every struggle of the auto workers. They created the conditions for the systematic deindustrialisation of the city and cleared the way for speculators to plunder the resources of the municipality and drive it into bankruptcy. At General Motors, the union worked closely with the company management and the government to cut wages by half for new employees and eliminate social programs.

The transformation of the IG Metall is also palpable in Bochum. As elsewhere, the trade union has responded to the global economic crisis, which has seen the union transformed into an advisory agency of management and the government. The IG Metall has never challenged media reports that it cashes in €460 million annually from its members and has an estimated wealth of €2 billion at its disposal. Increasingly this capital is invested in shares of other companies, turning the union itself into a profit-driven company.

Some 1,700 IG Metall representatives sit on the boards of directors of various companies, where they are paid handsome salaries and blend in with management. To defend their privileged social status, these trade union officials confront the working class with undisguised hostility. They play off workers at each location against each other and use the union apparatus to suppress all opposition as soon as it emerges.

Bochum and Detroit, as well as many other cities, show that the defence of jobs demands a rebellion against the trade unions. This also makes a political struggle against the SPD and Left Party necessary, since these organisations defend the capitalist profit system and the austerity dictates of the European Union (EU).

The destruction of the auto industry is inseparable from the radical austerity measures of the EU, which are destroying the living conditions of the working class in Greece, Portugal, Spain and several other countries. Workers' wages have been cut, social programs eliminated, and a massive army of unemployed workers created, while stock markets rise, the wealth of the super-rich grows and the salaries and bonuses of management explode.

Large sections of the population can no longer afford a car due to the austerity measures. Within a year, the number of new

purchases has fallen by 37 percent in Spain, 26 percent in Italy and 18 percent in France.

Under these conditions, jobs in the auto industry can only be defended within the framework of a socialist program, which has as its goal the abolition of the capitalist system.

The PSG calls upon all workers to fight the closure in Bochum and prepare an occupation strike. The defence of jobs should not be made dependent on the competitiveness of each location or the financial position of the company. A good-paying job is a non-negotiable, basic right which must be defended under all circumstances.

The auto concerns, like other big companies, the banks and large concentrations of wealth, must be nationalised and converted into social utilities to be controlled democratically. On this basis economic life can be entirely reorganised, so that it meets the needs of the workers and society as a whole, and not the demands for profit of the billionaires, banks and other speculators. The defence of all plants and jobs is a precondition for this.

The election statement of the PSG states: "Capitalism cannot be reformed. All attempts to overcome the crisis and tackle the pressing social problems fail due to the private ownership of the means of production, the crisis of the nation-state system, the anarchy of the capitalist market, the economic demands of the profit system and not least the insatiable greed of the ruling class. Not a single social problem can be resolved without breaking the power of the financial oligarchy."

It is necessary to view the struggle in Bochum as a first step in the mobilisation of the working class against the capitalist politics of all of the parliamentary parties, the trade unions and works councils, and organise accordingly.

The PSG calls for the building of action committees in factories and local communities, to organise the struggle against plant closures, layoffs and social cuts, and build strong links with workers in other cities and countries.

The most important preparation for the unavoidable class struggles ahead is the building of the Socialist Equality Party.



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