

Retired German auto workers fight for pension increase

Our correspondent
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Last Wednesday, several hundred former GM-Opel workers gathered at factory gate 4 at the company's plant in Bochum. They demanded adjustments in their company pensions to keep pace with inflation, to which they are entitled.

They marched from gate 4 in a column across Wittenerstraße and Dannenbaumstraße to gate 1, which is located on the factory grounds. Since they retired, very few of the between 30,000 and 40,000 former workers with an Opel pension have received any increase. Many had inquired with Opel as to why there pension had not been adjusted. For years, they were fobbed off with the claim that the pensions could not be increased since the business was performing badly.

Normally, companies have to increase their benefits at least by the rate of inflation. The only exception to this is when the net pay of the active workers in the company falls below the rate of price rises. In this case the pension adjustment can be at a correspondingly lower rate. The general obligation on employers to adjust pensions can only be avoided when employers commit to increasing the rate of the company pension by at least 1 percent annually for pensions issued after 31 December 1998.

Opel explained to the press that the economic position of the company in recent years "had not permitted" an increase in the company pension, and confirmed that pensions had been frozen for retirees.

The statement of the firm went on: "Independently of the legal obligation to review and adjust pensions, Adam Opel AG also has an obligation to certain groups of individuals to increase their pensions by a personalised minimum contribution." The company has remained consistently silent on which group of individuals this affects.

The demonstration was called by two former Opel

workers, Norbert Spittka and Werner Günther. Neither the trade union or works council participated in the organisation of the demonstration or rally. Günther told the press, "we expect that of the roughly 10,000 former workers in and around Bochum with a company pension, more than 1,000 will join us. We will pitch our tents before the factory and persevere until every one of us has written confirmation of our pension increase in our pockets!"

Although not quite as many turned up, the anger of the participants was palpable and at the next planned protest more are likely to take part.

The retired workers also responded angrily to the advertising contracts recently made public by GM and Opel. GM's cheap brand Chevrolet sponsors football club Manchester United, with a huge contract worth several hundred million Euros which will run over seven years. Opel has agreed sponsorship deals with German clubs Borussia Dortmund and Mainz 05, along with other teams in the top football league.

Rainer Einkenkel, the chair of the Bochum works council, had called a meeting at the same time as the protest and did not make an appearance before the pensioners.

The retirees responded furiously when they discovered that Opel had given a written commitment to the works council in 1991 to raise company pensions by 1 percent annually, regardless of the economic condition of the firm. They also greeted the news that "certain groups of individuals" had received annual increases with outrage, a fact which had obviously been kept strictly secret.

Werner Skrotzki explained that he had been forced to take legal action in order to receive the company pension along with the state pension at the beginning of the month and not only a month later. He was angry

about the fact that GM and Opel had millions of euros for football clubs, but supposedly there was no money for the pensioners.

Erich Stöhr stated that the last increase in his company pension was in 2004. “It can’t be going so badly for Opel when they can spend so much money on football advertising,” he said.

His colleagues Walter and Dieter added, “They won’t sell a single additional vehicle with that.” “They are relying on there being fewer of us as time passes. Many die before they get a cent of the increases which are due to them.”

Since 2001, Walter has not received an increase in his pension. “Who received something? That must have been people who were higher up, but not us. We will wait for three months at the longest and then we will seek legal advice.”

Aribert Günther, a former works councilor, explained that since June he had sent a number of email requests to the company’s pension department in Rüsselsheim, but had not yet received an answer. Responding to the question if he knew if those who had been chosen to receive pension increases had been on the works council, he stated, “The ordinary works councillors who did not sit on the committee certainly got nothing, the others probably have.”

At the rally in front of gate 1, Werner Günther said, “Even some works councillors knew nothing about the agreement from 1991. Who knows when and which privileged group of people were told about it. According to which criteria were those who received something chosen?”

The speaker called upon Manfred Gellrich, the head of the factory, to come out and give them a written understanding that the pensioners would have the increases due to them by the end of September in their bank accounts. But Gellrich did not appear. His press spokesman Alexander Bazio merely reassured the gathering that each individual case would be reviewed to see if a claim existed. This would of course take time.

Spittka interjected that it was not clear why the review should take so long. He had latterly worked at Opel in IT. If they were engaged, the affected pensioners could all have the money to which they are entitled in their accounts by the end of September.

His announcement that if nothing was done within a

month, they would call another demonstration and even more would attend was welcomed with applause. “It is an absolute disgrace that we pensioners have to fight like this.”

A WSWS team distributed a leaflet with the title “Socialism and the fight against the GM-Opel shutdown.” It contained a statement from the Socialist Equality Party’s (PSG) federal election candidate Dietmar Geisenkirsting, which described the backroom deal between the IG Metall and works council to collaborate with the closure of the plant, and called upon Opel workers to organise an occupation strike independently of the trade unions and join the PSG’s fight for a socialist programme.

At first, Spittka tried to prevent the distribution of the PSG’s leaflet with the remark, “There should be no election campaigning here.” However shortly afterwards he allowed a local candidate of the Maoist MLPD to openly propagandise for their campaign. Andreas Kunstmann of the PSG spoke up immediately. Referring to the PSG’s leaflet, he urged workers to take it, read it and to debate it among themselves. “Don’t trust the works council and the trade union. Just as they have acted here against the pensioners, they have also organised the destruction of jobs at Opel in recent years. And now they are organising the shutdown,” he declared.

Almost every participant in the demonstration took a leaflet. One worker slapped him on the shoulder in agreement. Another stated to a member of the PSG, “you have our vote.”



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