

A call for German workers to support GM Holden workers in Australia

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Achim Heppding is the candidate of the Socialist Equality Party (Partei für Soziale Gleichheit—PSG) for the Hesse state legislature in next month's German elections.

A wage freeze for the next three years, cuts in work breaks, company control over holidays — these are just some of the concessions in an agreement reached by the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU), working in collaboration with the Labour government, with General Motors Holden (GMH).

This sellout was presented for a vote by GMH workers in the form of an ultimatum. It amounted to blackmail, since rejection of the agreement by the workers would mean an end to production in 2016.

The AMWU made clear before the vote that it would accept the closure of the GMH plants and leave the workers out in the cold if they did not accept the contract.

In the vote by the 1,700 workers at the GMH assembly plant in Elizabeth, South Australia, 30 percent rejected the contract. A vote is still to be held at the plant in Melbourne.

GM-Opel workers in Europe have faced similar dilemmas as a result of the reactionary role of the trade unions. In Spain, the UK, Germany and other countries, GM has implemented drastic wage cuts and job reductions with the collaboration of the unions.

I appeal to all Opel workers and to workers throughout the European car industry: contact your GM colleagues in Australia and organize a common struggle! Turn to the Socialist Equality Party and the editorial board of the *World Socialist Web Site*. We will help you establish contact.

Global corporations such as GM fight ruthlessly for market share and profits at the expense of the workers. The international financial crisis is being used to turn

back the wheel of history by 100 years. The attacks on GM workers in Australia are part of an international strategy to slash labour costs and reverse all of the gains won by previous generations of workers.

The 2009 bankruptcy of GM in the US, directed by the Obama administration, was used to close plants and slash the wages of newly hired workers to half the level of older workers. The United Auto Workers union was rewarded for its support for this attack on its own members with large equity stakes in Big Three car companies.

In Europe, the European Union—led by the German government under Angela Merkel — is softening up the working class for attacks by the corporations by imposing cuts in social spending, especially in southern European countries such as Spain, Portugal, Italy and Greece. Unemployment rates of 20 to 30 percent are used as a weapon against the workforce. In both Spain and the UK, GM has already implemented severe wage cuts.

In every location, workers are pitted against one another with the help of the trade unions and works councils, which employ the same old argument: “If you work more cheaply and more productively, your jobs will be secure.” In reality, every concession brings plant closures even closer.

An illustrative example of the sellout of workers' interests is the closure of Opel's Bochum plant, with over 3,000 employees. For years, Opel workers were blackmailed by GM and the IG Metall union and works councils to accept one round of concessions after another, supposedly to save jobs. In March this year, when they refused to accept further wage cuts, job cuts and the closure of the plant in 2016, GM said the plant would be closed at the end of 2014. Gearbox production will cease in September.

Just two weeks ago, the press reported that in South Korea, where GM produces more than one in five of its cars, the same strategy is being pursued. Production is to be sharply reduced.

After years in which wages were cut and productivity hiked in Europe and the United States by pointing to lower labour costs in South Korea, wages there are now said to be too high. A strike last year led to a loss of production of nearly 50,000 cars.

The Opel Mokka model will no longer be built in South Korea, but instead in Spain. For their part, the South Korean unions assert that "compared to Australia and Germany, Korea enjoys cost advantages". GM and the other auto companies, together with the national governments and the unions, have put in motion a spiral for the workers that goes in only one direction: downwards.

In the UK, Ford plants in Southampton and Dagenham have been closed. In Genk, Belgium, the Ford plant will be closed at the end of 2014. The closure of these three plants alone destroys 6,200 jobs.

In France, the factory of the PSA Group (Peugeot-Citroen) in Aulnay is to be closed next year, with the loss of 3,000 jobs.

In each country, the global auto corporations rely on the unions when it comes to imposing their attacks. The unions have been integrated into senior management. In many cases, they help to plan the cuts so as to outmanoeuvre workers in other countries.

The roots of the transformation of the unions are to be found not just in the corrupt character of their leadership, although this cannot be denied. The globalization of production has deprived the unions of the basis for their nationalist and reformist perspective. Because they defend capitalism unconditionally, they have become the employers' closest partners and fiercest defenders. Their primary objective is to increase the competitiveness of their own plants and their own bosses.

The PSG election manifesto states: "The unions have long since ceased to represent the interests of workers. They represent a bureaucratic apparatus alien and hostile to the working class. Union functionaries are paid royally as co-managers, who intimidate and oppress workers. In Germany, every sacking, pay cut and plant closure bears the signature of the unions and their works council officials."

The working class can defend its hard-won rights—and a job is an unconditional basic right—only if it rebels against the unions. It must organise itself independently of the unions and the works councils, establish rank-and-file committees, and make links to the other car plants around the world to organize an international struggle.

Such an approach requires a socialist and internationalist perspective, focusing on the conquest of political power. The auto companies—just as the other large corporations and banks—must be expropriated, transformed into public property, and placed under democratic control. On this basis, the entire economy can be reorganized so that it serves the needs of working people and society as a whole, and not the profit demands of the billionaires, bankers, and speculators. The defence of all factories and jobs is a prerequisite for this.

This is the significance of the election campaign of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party).

It is necessary to break with the politics of the unions and the social democratic parties. In contrast to the nationalist perspective of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Left Party and the trade unions, the working class needs an international socialist programme and a worldwide Marxist party, the Fourth International.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact