

German union seals shutdown of GM-Opel's Bochum plant

Dietmar Henning
22 November 2013

Last weekend, IG Metall agreed to a contract with GM-Opel management, which seals the closure of the plant in Bochum by the end of 2014. Around 3,300 workers at Opel and thousands more in supply industries will lose their jobs.

GM-Opel management reached an agreement on the key points of the deal after a night of negotiations with the heads of the works council and the union under the leadership of IG Metall regional coordinator for North-Rhein Westphalia Knut Giesler. The agreement was portrayed as a success by all sides.

According to the deal, vehicle production will come to an end by December 31, 2014. The distribution centre in plant 3 will initially continue to operate, with the current 430 jobs to be supplemented with another 265. The distribution centre is not operated by Opel, but by the logistics firm Neoviva, which is majority controlled by the equity investment firm. Wage cuts are certain, and a future closure has not been ruled out. There are 171 apprentices who will be able to complete their training over the coming years before they are made redundant.

Alternative jobs are to be offered to 200 workers at the GM-Opel plants at Eisenach or Rüsselsheim. Another 700 employees are to be laid off and transferred onto pensions by means of a "retirement bridge." At least 1,700 workers will be offered a choice between a payoff agreement and transfer to a temporary employment agency until the end of 2016. The conditions for either the payoff agreement or the retirement bridge have not been made clear.

In sum, the deal is essentially the same as that which was overwhelmingly rejected in March by the Bochum workforce in a vote on the "master pay agreement" presented by IG Metall. The only difference was that at that time, the closure was not planned until 2016.

As a result, there are no plans to hold a vote of IG Metall members.

How did this come about?

In 2009, the Obama administration forced Opel's owner General Motors (GM), which had been recording billions in losses due to the economic crisis, into bankruptcy. In collaboration with the United Auto Workers union, several plants were closed in the US, thousands of jobs eliminated and wages halved for new employees. GM is demanding similar cutbacks at Opel's plants in Europe.

After careful consideration by management, including a possible sale, the German union seized the initiative in early 2012. IG Metall chair Berthold Huber presented the "Germany plan" along with central works council chair Dr. Wolfgang Schäfer-Klug. Their plan for the restructuring of Opel contained wide-ranging rationalisation measures, including the elimination of jobs, social cuts and wage reductions.

When management demanded the closure of a production facility, IG Metall suggested the Bochum plant. The elimination of around 70 percent of jobs and massive wage cuts over the preceding 10 years had made the plant a prime candidate for a complete shutdown. In addition, an example was to be made of the remaining workforce, who had often protested and taken strike action against the will of the union.

IG Metall then negotiated the "master contract" that isolated the workforce in Bochum. While Opel workers at other plants were given vague promises of future investment, the workforce in Bochum were supposed to vote for the dismantling of their own plant.

When they opposed this in March, they were denounced and attacked by IG Metall. As a punishment, the shutdown was brought forward from the end of 2016 to the end of 2014.

Following the vote, chairman of the Bochum works council Rainer Einenkel consoled the workers with the promise of negotiations, while vehemently opposing any fight against the closure. Einenkel is a member of the Left Party, which has consistently backed his stance. The state government in North-Rhein Westphalia, led by the Social Democratic Party (SPD), endorsed the actions of the union and did not get involved.

Secret talks began behind the scenes between the Bochum works council and Opel management. At first, IG Metall remained in the background, after many workers had turned against it.

These events contain vital lessons that go beyond Opel and the Bochum facility. They confirm that jobs, wages and social achievements can be defended only independently and in opposition to the trade unions.

The trade unions were already on the right wing of the workers movement prior to the First World War. In 1933, they even attempted, without success, to reach an accommodation with Hitler. The economic upturn after the Second World War enabled them to combine their support for capitalism with certain social reforms.

But globalisation undermined the basis of this type of social partnership. In the race for competitiveness on the world market, the trade unions have become the most important allies of the corporations in their attacks on jobs, wages and working conditions.

The destruction of hundreds of thousands of jobs in east Germany, the implementation of the Hartz social reforms (named after IG Metall member Peter Hartz), the vast expansion of part-time working and subcontracted work and the reduction of wages were all achieved in close cooperation with the unions.

The trade unions are no longer in any sense workers' organisations. They are bound by personal ties and economic interests to the corporations.

IG Metall has placed its billions in wealth in company shares, investment funds and property and has thereby a direct interest in increasing profits at the expense of the workers. Their members occupy more than 1,700 positions on the boards of major German firms.

In addition, more than a few officials have switched to leading positions in company management. Several predecessors of NRW regional head Giesler now earn millions as labour directors or human resources chiefs

at major metal and steel firms, including Harald Schartau at Georgsmarienhütte GMBH, Peter Gasse at Krupp-Mannesman and Oliver Burkhard at Thyssen Krupp. Giesler, who is already well paid, can expect a similarly high-paid post as a reward for his current work.

Workers must organise independently in opposition to this conspiracy of company management, trade unions and works councils. Action committees must be built which are directly accountable to the workers to defend jobs, wages and social achievements.

Workers around the globe are confronted with political tasks. They face problems similar to those of GM-Opel workers. The closure of the Bochum plant is part of a social counterrevolution taking place across all of Europe.

The SPD is currently in talks with the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) over a grand coalition, which will continue to implement the brutal austerity measures dictated by the Merkel government, including in Germany.

The struggle is therefore not over, but is only just beginning for the workers in Bochum. To prevent new attacks, a revolutionary party must be built, which fights for a socialist programme.

The right to a job and a decent income should not be subordinated to the competitiveness of each firm or production location. The banks and major concerns must be nationalised and placed under democratic control. The immense financial means of society must be used for the creation and securing of jobs and the improvement of living standards, and not for the enrichment of a tiny elite of managers and financiers.

A party is required that is based on the lessons drawn from the experiences of the workers movement over the last century, which strives for a socialist and internationalist perspective. In Germany, this is the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party). We call upon all of those who reject the undermining of the living conditions of the working class to contact the WSWS.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact