

The “Detroit Project” in Bochum

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In October, an artistic project began in the German city of Bochum under the slogan “This is not Detroit.” The title refers to the devastation of the one-time booming Motor City, the centre of Opel’s parent company General Motors, which is now insolvent after decades of deindustrialization. Bochum, situated in Germany’s industrial Ruhr region faces a similar fate, with the ending of auto production at the end of 2014.

However, the initiative by the Bochum theatre and the Urban Art Ruhr group is not aimed at supporting those GM-Opel workers threatened with the loss of their jobs, let alone uniting them with their American counterparts. In fact the closure of the plant, rather than its maintenance, is the premise for this project, which is to be on display over an entire year.

In a short interview with the *Main-Spitze*, project leader and dramatist at the Bochum theatre Sabine Reich made clear the concern of the project was not to involve itself in a “discussion intrinsically about Opel,” but more the overriding question of “what alternatives exist for the company’s sites.” She did not say why this should be the main issue under conditions where, according to projections, up to 45,000 workers in the region could lose their jobs.

In reality, artists, theatre actors, town planners and others are being mobilised to back the GM-Opel works council and the IG Metall trade union, which have both agreed to the shutdown of the plant—the first closure of a major German auto plant since 1945.

The chairman of the Bochum works council, Rainer Eienkel, who played a major role in suppressing any effective opposition to the shutdown, was invited to the opening of the project along with his deputy Murat Yaman. Eienkel claimed on his website that the project was a sign of solidarity.

Despite claims to the contrary, the Detroit project has as little to do with solidarity with Opel workers and the residents of Bochum as the so-called “Opel solidarity festival” held earlier this year. The main aim of the misnamed festival organised by the IG Metall and works council and supported by the Bochum theatre was to demobilise Opel workers and convince workers that the closure was a fait accompli.

The organisers’ aim of glorifying the trade unions was illustrated by the invitation extended to Dr. Manfred Wannöfel from Ruhr University in Bochum to the initial meeting on 11 October. Wannöfel is head of the joint working group of the university and IG Metall. In his contribution he praised the role of the Bochum works council and the trade unions, and hailed the system of consensus as a panacea to prevent layoffs and plant shutdowns.

Flying in the face of reality, Wannöfel declared that “General

Motors/Opel (will) not enforce a radical eradication” of jobs. He then held out the prospect of new types of companies emerging from higher education as the future of the Ruhr region. In fact the opening of such companies has been taking place for a long time, but they have only been able to replace a tiny fraction of those jobs lost.

The Detroit project has been conceived jointly by three additional Opel sites across Europe where workers also face savage job and wage cuts: Gliwice in Poland, Zaragoza in Spain and Ellesmere Port in Britain. It poses the question, “Can art identify new perspectives for change for the motor cities?” It is to search for “answers to the future of the city, jobs and art,” and provide “new impulses for the development of the city.”

“With the Detroit project, Bochum will become a location for the exhibition of international art,” the project’s programme states.

In the course of the coming year, the works or products resulting from these efforts will be presented throughout Bochum. The centrepiece will be an international festival due to take place between April and July. Many artists and curators are being invited to take part, including Tyree Guyton, the initiator of the Heidelberg project in Detroit, Igor Stokfiszveski (from Krytyka Polityczna or Political Criticism), Marta Keil (curator) from Gliwice, Poland, Paul Domela (“Shrinking Cities”) from Liverpool, Britain, Alberto Nanclares (Basurama), Patricia de Monte and José Carlos Arnal (FZCC Zaragoza) from Spain, Tim Etchells (Britain) and Ari Benjamin Meyers (Berlin/New York).

According to its own statements, the group Krytyka Polityczna views itself as inheritors of the traditions of the engaged intelligentsia (Intelligenziya) of the educated middle class, which in the Russia of the 19th century deemed its artistic and social activities as “a necessary undertaking on behalf of less well-off social layers.” Although they try to adopt a left-wing image, the group consciously associates itself with anticommunist dissidents who criticised Stalinism from the right and supported the reintroduction of capitalism. Jacek Kuron, one of their creative leaders, was a close advisor to Lech Walesa and, as minister, responsible for economic shock therapy in Poland.

The group stands out for its vehement defence of the European Union. In 2003, Krytyka Polityczna published an open letter denouncing any criticism of the planned EU constitution, which prepared the way for attacks on democratic and social rights. In their magazine, the group publishes predominantly postmodernist authors such as Alain Badiou or Judith Butler.

Alongside such ideologists, mainly town planners and architects were represented at the opening of the project. In part, they

presented interesting projects for the participative design of public spaces. The Spanish architect Patricia de Monte presented a project, which she had displayed in Zaragoza. Together with residents of poor areas in the city, she transformed four empty factory sites into playing areas, sports fields and social spaces. In the process, architecturally noteworthy squares emerged.

The sculptor and painter Tyree Guyton from Detroit allied with residents in the city's Heidelberg Street, which were falling apart and threatened with demolition by the city authorities. With the involvement of the remaining residents and young people in particular, Guyton refurbished the housing with bright colours and sculptures. The project, which is now self-financing, has existed for 27 years and became a tourist attraction. It has also generated ire from certain political and business interests and has recently been targeted by arsonists.

Such projects, which often have to struggle for further financing and against urban decay, are being used by the initiators of the Detroit project to cover up the real social relations in Germany and the US, and promote the interests of a section of the middle class, which hopes to gain government contracts and business opportunities. In reality, the closure of the GM-Opel plant in Bochum is not a town-planning problem, but rather the prelude to historic cuts and layoffs throughout industry in Europe.

The "Etopia" centre in the GM-Opel city of Zaragoza in Spain is an initiative of the city council and the ministry for industry, tourism and trade. According to José Carlos Arnal, who heads the project, "Etopia" is concerned with so-called informal economies, which are assuming an increasing proportion of total economic output. At the same, however, Arnal raised the question as to whether such small self-made projects could really provide solutions to the global crisis.

The ideas discussed in the working groups during the symposium focused on alternative "creative economies" clearly directed towards a petty-bourgeois layer. For example, economic exchange experiments such as bartering, life without money, time banking and so forth were praised as successes for this particular niche of society. The remarks of Alberto Nanclares (Basurama) summed up such anti-working class conceptions. Asked to comment on the closure of the GM-Opel factory, he said, "Great! Then more bicycles for all!"

At the same time, the organisers appealed to the political elite to accept their assistance. The curator Sabine Reich complained in the *Main-Spitze* that although there had been planning debates at the city and state levels, they had not been involved. "We would like to speak with them," she added. Her appeal is likely to be taken up. The local and state cultural authorities have already freed up €1.15 million for the project.

The project in Bochum will not be able to fulfil its claim that "This is not Detroit." On the contrary, it will contribute to Bochum heading in the same direction as the one-time auto centre in the US.

Detroit is now controlled by an emergency manager who has declared war on the workers of the city. Kevyn Orr, a trusted ally of Wall Street, has cut jobs, wages and pensions for city workers, and has threatened to sell off the world-famous works in the Detroit Institute of Arts to pay the city's creditors. Orr, a

Democrat, has been able to do this because the trade unions have suppressed working-class opposition in order to grab a share of the spoils for the trade union bureaucrats.

The situation is similar in Bochum, where the Social Democrats (SPD) essentially play the part of the Democratic Party. In the heart of the Ruhr region, once the largest industrial area in Europe, the former mining city has been a stronghold of the SPD for decades. A closely connected network of politicians and trade unionists, which reaches from the state parliament in Düsseldorf through the city council to the districts, and from the trade union centres to the offices of the works councils, functions as a straitjacket on workers and has betrayed all initiatives to combat social attacks.

In Detroit, the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* have seized the initiative to break through this trap for the workers. On 4 October, 500 workers, young people, students and artists came to a demonstration organised against the selloff of the works of the DIA. Now the SEP is organising a Workers Inquiry into the Attack on the DIA and the Bankruptcy of Detroit.

In a comment entitled "The significance of the rally to defend the Detroit Institute of Art," the WSWS wrote, "The International Committee and the WSWS have long insisted that culture is necessary for the working class and that the struggle of the working class for socialism is necessary for culture. Art cannot save itself. The whole progressive heritage of mankind, including its cultural heritage, depends upon the intervention of the working class in opposition to the plunder being carried out by the modern-day aristocracy."

This is the perspective on which serious art today must be based. It must direct its attention and sensitivity to the real social processes. The cover-up of these processes, to which the Detroit project in Bochum is dedicated, can only lead to an ideological dead end rather than genuine art. No spirit of renewal can be produced when the essentials of life for the working population are being stripped away. As the art critic Alexander K. Voronsky once noted, a false idea and false content cannot find a completed form.



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