

Germany: Workers protest Johnson Controls closure in Bochum

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On Saturday, around 300 employees of the auto parts supplier Johnson Controls protested in Bochum against the destruction of their jobs. At the end of the protest, a workers assembly took place.

Johnson Controls, a US business, is among the 100 largest companies in the world and along with the auto industry is involved in energy optimisation for buildings. The concern plans to eliminate 220 from a total of 660 jobs when the neighbouring General Motors/Opel plant closes at the end of the year.

In Bochum, Johnson Controls manufactures seats for the Zafira as well as the Ford Fiesta, which is built in Cologne. The Bochum plant was offloaded by Opel 30 years ago and taken over by Johnson Controls in the 1990s. With Ford planning to move Fiesta production from Cologne to Romania by 2017, the plant is threatened with a complete shutdown in the medium term.

Works council chairman Dietmar Kupfer stated that the massive destruction of jobs in the Ruhr region, Europe's largest industrial centre, was causing fears that a catastrophic process like that in Detroit had been set in motion.

"It will be tough" if further jobs in industry are lost in the Ruhr region, Kupfer told the *World Socialist Web Site*. "Jobs in retail or in the cultural sector cannot replace industrial jobs." He recalled studies showing that for every job in the auto industry, 10 additional jobs are reliant upon it.

According to a study by the Aachen Institute, 45,000 jobs in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) are dependent on the Opel plant. In NRW alone, around 130 suppliers and service providers work with the plant, and these in turn employ their own suppliers. Johnson Controls, for example, is supplied by a further 100 firms.

Some employees fear that Johnson Controls could

withdraw entirely from the auto industry. The destruction of jobs is not limited to Bochum; a plant in Peine has already been closed. The shutdown of operations in Grefrath and Wuppertal is also planned.

Many workers spoke about their fears for the future. Marina Bienzel has worked at Johnson Controls for 20 years. "We need the jobs," she said, adding that the situation was not so bad for her. "I'm almost 60 and would just like to work for another three years. But what will all of my co-workers who are 40 and 50 do? They will definitely still have to work." Since many businesses in the region were closing, and lots of jobs in the auto industry were being destroyed, "They will have it tough," she said.

At the meeting following the protest, Johnson Controls company management stuck firmly to their plans to eliminate jobs. Those workers affected would be offered replacement jobs, they claimed, including 90 jobs in the Saarlouis plant in the Saarland, 350 kilometres away. As no benefits were offered to assist with the move, only a few young temporary workers and those on contracts have indicated an interest in this, according to a statement from the works council.

Following the assembly, works council chairman Kupfer called in the *Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* for renewed protest action by workers across the entire region. This should be organised by the IG Metall trade union, he said.

This is the last thing IG Metall is prepared to do. Together with Opel's central works council, the union has worked out the plans for the closure of the GM/Opel Bochum plant, which has resulted in the job losses at Johnson Controls. The union now sees its job as the suppression of all opposition to this. The Bochum IG Metall along with the regional works council firmly oppose any measures to fight the closure

of the plant.

Prior to the assembly, a conference of IG Metall delegates rejected any mobilisation against the layoffs. The Johnson Controls works council suggested at the meeting that the defence of the jobs should be expanded to other factories across the entire region. Along with Opel and Johnson Controls, steel producers Outokumpu in Bochum, Thyssen-Krupp in Essen and other firms are destroying jobs.

Under these conditions, the call for IG Metall to organise the defence of jobs means leading workers down a blind alley and consoling them with the promise of action that will never happen.

Volker Strehl, the deputy representative of IG Metall Bochum, made clear at the workers assembly that the trade union was firmly opposed to a struggle against the layoffs. He appealed for negotiations, where information would be exchanged. Other measures were “not the best solution,” he said.

IG Metall is supported by the Left Party. Previously they gave backing to the trade union and works council Chairman Rainer Eienkel in the dismantling of the Opel plant.

In a press release on February 7, Sevim Dagdelen, the Left Party’s deputy in parliament for Bochum, urged the workers to turn to the state. “Only stronger engagement by the state can stop this trend of mass layoffs,” Dagdelen said. In addition, she demanded a legal ban on mass layoffs. As a positive example of state influence on a company Dagdelen referred remarkably to Volkswagen, where the collaboration between the trade union, works council, company management and state government is closer than at any other company.

VW was a forerunner in the outsourcing of whole areas of production to supply firms with low wages, the increase in pressure on the workers, the division of workers into different income groups, and much more. The corrupt relationship between the works council and board of management landed the former works council chairman Klaus Volkert behind bars for two years and nine months, while labour director Peter Hartz, who gave his name to the Hartz welfare reforms, was given a suspended sentence.

The spokesman for the Left Party’s executive in Bochum, Ralf Lange, called on the management at Johnson Controls “to take care of replacement jobs

now,” a classic formulation that accepts the layoffs and declares all resistance against them as hopeless. He then cynically wished “all the best to the combative works council and IG Metall in the fight to fully maintain all jobs.”

Many workers are rejecting IG Metall. Johan Wolant, 44, who has worked at Johnson Controls for 16 years, told the WSWS, “I am not in IG Metall—out of conviction.” He does not support the politics of the trade union. “They invest more in property than in their members,” he said. “But I expect from a trade union that the money they get from their members should go towards benefitting the members.”

The trade unions have become businesses, working as co-managers with the company directors in the task ensuring peace in the factories. They sign off on every plant shutdown, and every job cut.

Members of the PSG (Partei für Soziale Gleichheit—Socialist Equality Party) distributed the Autoworkers Newsletter, which draws the lessons of the closure of the GM/Opel Bochum plant, stating: “Jobs, wages and social achievements can only be defended independently of and in opposition to the trade unions.” To this end, action committees directly accountable to the workers must be built.



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