

IG-Metall holds bogus “youth protest” at GM-Opel in Rüsselsheim, Germany

Marianne Arens**20 June 2014**

On June 13, the IG Metall trade union organized a token demonstration in Rüsselsheim, Germany, the headquarters of GM-Opel. The event was held the same day as the union signed a severance deal, which seals the fate of thousands of workers losing their jobs at Opel’s soon-to-be-closed Bochum plant.

The “protest” in Rüsselsheim—which called for improved training conditions and the hiring of apprentices—was a stunt organized with the blessing of corporate management. It was announced as the highpoint of a weeklong conference of apprentice “representatives” from GM-Opel locations around Europe and was to be a “large rally,” according to the local newspaper.

Management gave the trainees time off at all of its German plants while IG Metall organized bus transportation. Nevertheless, only a handful of apprentices—chiefly budding young bureaucrats—showed up, while few if any workers or trainees showed up.

With 3,000 hourly employees, the Rüsselsheim plant is one of the company’s largest. The factory also has 450 apprentices and there are another 1,000 trainees at other GM-Opel plants in the country.

The rally chiefly consisted of members of the works council and others close to the IG Metall apparatus, as well as journalists and European “youth representatives.” Only a few dozen apprentices marched under the IG Metall banner from the training centre to Opel’s main gate.

The vast majority of young workers at Opel made clear their disinterest and contempt for IG Metall by their absence.

IG Metall used the rally as a training event for a new generation of union functionaries. They were able to practice some sloganeering in public and schmooze

with company and political officials.

The young speakers complained about the poor conditions in Europe, including high unemployment in Spain and the fact that every second young person is working in precarious conditions. At the same time they deliberately concealed the role of the unions, which have played a key role in blocking working class opposition to the attack on jobs and social conditions. This includes colluding with GM to close the first auto factory in Germany since the end of World War II.

Bochum is the second GM-Opel location in Europe to be shut down, following the closing of the Antwerp, Belgium factory in 2010. Across Opel and Vauxhall’s European facilities, 15,000 of 50,000 jobs have been eliminated in the past five years.

IG Metall and other European unions have pit workers in different factories against each other and blocked a European-wide struggle against the downsizing of the auto industry.

The cynicism of the speeches at the Rüsselsheim rally was hard to beat. Not a single speaker dealt in any detail with the shutdown of the Bochum plant. It was mentioned in passing by Sinan Aksoy, the youth representative from Bochum, who was forced to admit, “Many said to those of us who came here from Bochum: why do you bother? You have no prospects for a future anyway.”

Aksoy is no innocent. He is a supporter of Rainer Einenkel, the chairman of the Bochum works council who has been a key figure in the drawn-out shutdown of the factory. Einenkel repeatedly blocked the adoption of any measures to combat the final closure of the plant, which is due to occur by the end of this year.

In all of the remaining plants, IG Metall and the works council are working hand in hand with management to step up pressure on the workers to

return the company to profitability.

Joint Works Council Chairman Dr. Wolfgang Schäfer-Klug explained to the aspiring union functionaries how important cooperation with management was for advancement up the career ladder. A successful rise of a trade union official from a youth representative, through the works council and as a workers' representative to the company board, he said, was only possible through a close and trusting collaboration with management.

Schäfer-Klug praised the company's restructuring measures as a victory for shareholders, saying the union had helped bring Opel/Vauxhall back onto the road of success after years of losses.

He praised the union trainees for their cosy chat with Opel chief executive Karl-Thomas Neumann the day before. "The training standards must apply to all youth; we agree with Neumann on this," he announced. "And you achieved a common understanding yesterday with Opel chief Neumann."

Other speakers hailed the benefits of the European Union, which is essential to guaranteeing their positions in the European Works Council. A European-wide works council network is soon to be established with EU funds to reduce labour costs and boost competitiveness.

Deputy chairman of the right-wing Christian Democratic Union in Hesse and mayor of Rüsselsheim Patrick Burghardt declared, "Without Europe, the EU, the open market and the euro we would not have mastered the crisis so well." He welcomed the young functionaries to the city, stating that they had the task of campaigning for a strong European market.

IG Metall officials asserted that peace, welfare, and the securing of social standards could not be achieved without the EU. This required acting "as European citizens, as employees and as trade unionists."

These comments flew in the face of reality. In fact the EU and European Central Bank's brutal austerity policies are responsible for an enormous retrogression in the social position of workers in Spain, Greece and other countries. At the same time, the EU is collaborating with the US to prepare a catastrophic war with Russia.

The disgusting spectacle in Rüsselsheim shows that a genuine defence of jobs, wages and working conditions requires a rebellion against IG Metall and its officials.

This is only possible on the basis of an international strategy and a socialist program.



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