

Germany: GM Opel plant closure exposes bankruptcy of IG Metall

Dietmar Henning
8 December 2014

The last car to be produced by GM Opel in Bochum rolled off the assembly line last Thursday. For the first time in postwar German history, an automobile plant has been closed down. The shutdown was made possible by the IG Metall (IGM) engineering trade union and the plant's works council.

The 52-year history of the Opel plant in Bochum is representative of an era, an era in which the working class was thwarted from advancing its interests by the bureaucracies of the industrial unions and the Social Democratic Party (SPD). The persistent decline of the Bochum Opel works is symbolic of the degeneracy of trade union policy and the plant's demise underscores the bankruptcy of the trade unions and their defenders.

For decades, the Ruhr was the largest industrial region in Germany. After the Second World War, the coal and steel industries formed the basis for the so-called German economic miracle. Hundreds of mines and steel mills filled the national purse. In the 1950s, the Ruhr city of Duisburg recorded the highest per capita income in the young Federal Republic. A self-confident working class gained important social concessions. The unions used these achievements to promote their corporatist concepts of participation in management and stakeholder partnership. Their goal was to integrate workers as much as possible into the company structures and interests, company management and the capitalist profit system.

When pits began to close in the wake of the coal crisis in the late 1950s, new jobs were created. An Opel factory was built on the former site of the Dannebaum colliery in 1962. Motors were assembled in Plant II from 1962, and production of the Kadett A started in Plant I in July 1963. The third division, the Plant III warehouse, was added in 1965.

About one in four of the approximately 11,000 workers at that time were former miners, and most Opel employees came from miner families. At this time, there were still 19 mines in Bochum alone, with the last mine closing in 1972. The Prosper Haniel colliery in Bottrop, the last of several hundred mines formerly operating in the Ruhr region, closed in 2012.

In the 1980s, the Opel workforce in Bochum grew to more than 20,000, but the site's decline also began in this decade. Above all, the development of computer technology enabled companies to internationalise their production. Workers were placed under increasing pressure by corporations, which were now able to shift production to low-wage countries. About half-a-million manufacturing jobs were dismantled in the Ruhr region between 1980 and 2002.

The workers at Opel, a subsidiary of the globally operating General Motors Corporation (GM), were confronted with this problem at a

very early stage. While the management extorted the workforce by threatening to move production to other cheaper countries, IG Metall persisted with its nationalist perspective of industrial partnership. Concessions made by the works councils and trade unions failed to solve this problem. Again and again, IGM and the works council functionaries proclaimed: "These concessions strengthen our competitiveness and therefore secure our jobs."

As early as 1989, works council boss Rolf Breuer declared that works councils were basically prepared to tolerate "blackmail to the point of accepting child labour" (*The Trade Unionist*, May 1989).

The Bochum workers repeatedly rebelled against this policy of so-called concessions. But each time, IG Metall and its SPD-dominated works councils came to the aid of those in the company, who opposed industrial action.

In the 1980s, Peter Jaszczyk, a works councillor since 1970, led a Bochum plant opposition group, calling itself "Opel Forum" and later "Engineering Workers at Opel". Jaszczyk was a member of the Stalinist Communist Party of Germany (DKP), which worked closely with the East German Socialist Unity Party (SED) Stalinist regime. He later joined the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), the successor to the SED, and finally the SPD.

The DKP had tactical differences with the SPD and the Social Democratic works council chairmen, Günter Perschke and Rolf Breuer. But like the SPD, it defended the principle of industrial partnership in the context of worker participation and refused to take issue with the capitalist system.

In a detailed article about militant disputes in the engineering industry, *Der Spiegel* news magazine, which certainly had no sympathy with the DKP, wrote as early as 1973 that the DKP operated "in line with strict observance of union loyalty within the framework of the code of industrial relations. In practice, most DKP works council officials differ from their SPD colleagues only in being more robustly engaged."

After the collapse of the Stalinist German Democratic Republic (GDR, East Germany), the former DKP officials moved further to the right. Nevertheless, IG Metall intensified exclusion proceedings against Jaszczyk and 80 other union members, when his opposition list gained the support of a majority of employees at the works council election in 1990. Jaszczyk and his colleagues consequently renounced all criticism of the IG Metall and its works council representatives, and returned to the bosom of the IGM bureaucracy.

In 1996, Jaszczyk was then elected works council chairman and continued from where his predecessors had left off: blackmailing the workforce and brokering more and more concessions "to secure the (competitiveness of the) Bochum industrial site". But the Bochum

workers rebelled again, storming the works council office and demanding that Jaszczyk stop colluding with the management. This was in vain. Five years later, in 2001, the balance of Jaszczyk's term as works council chairman amounted to the loss of almost 3,000 jobs at the Bochum plant.

Another movement, the "Opposition Trade Unionist Group at IGM", formed to oppose Jaszczyk. In 1996, works council member Wolfgang Schaumburg collected about 4,000 signatures (one third of the workforce at the time), demanding the council's dismissal from office. However, this group also promoted a purely trade union perspective. It functioned along the established lines of staff participation in management and refused to mobilise the workers against IG Metall and the works council bureaucracy.

When the group, under its new name of "Opposition without Borders", for the first time failed to win a single seat on the works council in 2010, Schaumburg admitted to the *New Germany* newspaper (August 4, 2010): "We have placed too much emphasis on talking to union officials and works councils, and neglected cooperation with colleagues in other plants."

In 2002, Jaszczyk resigned from his post in the wake of a corruption scandal within the works council, and the SPD functionary Dietmar Hahn took over the chairmanship. Two years later, the General Motors management announced the elimination of 12,000 of the company's 63,000 jobs in Europe, including 10,000 in Germany. The Bochum workers responded with a spontaneous walkout—against the will of IG Metall and their works councils. The strike was sold out and Rainer Eienkel took over as works council chairman shortly before Christmas. At the time, more than 10,000 men and women were still employed at the Bochum Opel plant.

Like Jaszczyk, Eienkel was a former member of the DKP. He continued the policy of job and wage cuts and, like his predecessors, defended all concessions made by the works council by arguing that this was the only way jobs at the site could be protected.

When General Motors went bankrupt in the wake of the global financial and economic crisis in 2008, it appeared Opel was going to be put up for sale. When GM suddenly distanced itself from the sales plans, IG Metall and their works councils again offered the corporation their services. In 2010, wage cuts of an annual €265 million were conceded in the "Master Agreement".

In mid-2012, current IG Metall boss Berthold Huber joined with Opel general works council chairman Dr. Wolfgang Schäfer-Klug to present the so-called "Germany Plan", the union's own reorganisation programme, allegedly designed to "strengthen the Opel brand" through job dismantling, reduced wages and cuts in employer contributions to workers' social benefits.

Company executives welcomed this initiative but demanded further cuts and the closure of one of the production sites. The IGM leadership recommended Bochum for the closure. The workforce there had long been a thorn in the side of the union. Following the shutdown decision, IG Metall systematically organised the isolation of the Bochum Opel workers.

The so-called "Master Collective Agreement" proved useful in this respect. Vague promises about possible future investment in the company were made to employees at the other Opel plants in order to win their acceptance of a collective agreement, focusing on the closure of the Bochum plant in 2016.

When the Bochum workers refused to consent to this, they were fiercely abused and attacked by IG Metall functionaries and works council hacks from other sites. As punishment, the shutdown was

brought forward to 2014.

Eienkel put on a show of being ready to fight for jobs, but suppressed any serious opposition to the Opel management. He tried to console the workers and attacked those who really wanted to fight, labelling them hotheads who threatened to undermine the union's negotiations over the reorganisation plan. Eienkel was supported by the Left Party, of which he was a member.

A role similar to those of all the previous trade union opposition groups was played by the Stalinist supporters of the Marxist-Leninist Party of Germany (MLPD), whose factory-floor group "Offensive" operated three of the Opel works councils at the time. Their sham appeals for "International Solidarity" were primarily designed to distract workers' attention from the role actually being played by IG Metall, which the group slavishly defended.

Now the last 3,300 Opel workers are to be made redundant. Thousands of jobs will be lost in Opel's components division in Bochum. Unemployment and poverty will increase even further in this already troubled region.

In the next six months, a residual staff will take care of the work site dismantling, and ownership of Plants I and II—the latter ceased production last year—will be transferred to the city of Bochum. Plant III, which had already been outsourced in 2006, currently employs 420 workers. These will be supplemented by another 265 from the now redundant Opel workforce. This means that Opel will retain control over its distribution centre at least until 2016. Eienkel, now 60 years old, will move to a position in the transfer company for a year, after which he is expected to retire.

In March 2014, the Bochum Opel plant was added to the list of sites commemorated in the Ruhr region's "Industrial Heritage Trail". Like many disused mines and steel mills, it is now a mere relic of the past. The same holds for IG Metall and the other trade unions. The times when they were able to promote themselves as organisations representing the interests of workers are long gone. They have become corporate co-managers, which organise job destruction and wage cuts and ensure that all opposition to these processes is suppressed in the factories.

The history of Opel's Bochum plant has important lessons for all workers. To defend jobs, wages and rights, they must break with the union apparatuses and turn to an international socialist perspective. This is the perspective of the Fourth International and its German section, Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party).



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