

Stress and speedup in German GM-Opel plants

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27 April 2015

In mid-April, GM-Opel worker Viktor Uselmann was acquitted of charges of assault before the Rüsselsheim district court. Just one day earlier, the Darmstadt Labour Court had upheld his unfair dismissal claim.

Over three hundred of his colleagues had signed a petition calling for Uselmann to be reinstated. Uselmann has worked at Opel, the German subsidiary of General Motors, for 25 years and is an elected shop steward.

An incident on 18 September 2014 led to his dismissal. On that morning, a worker in his team was missing due to illness and Uselmann and the “team spokesman”, George Lippok, got into a dispute over who should take over his work on the shift.

A team spokesperson is a sort of foreman with monitoring functions, including meeting production targets. He or she must ensure that personnel and equipment are in the proper place, and if someone is missing, take over his or her duties until a replacement arrives on the assembly line.

Lippok should have taken on the work of the missing worker. Instead, he had a heated argument with Uselmann during the shift change, which, according to witnesses, led to a brief exchange of blows.

Two days later, the company’s legal department took up the incident and immediately suspended Uselmann. A month later, on October 21, he was fired by Opel. At the same time, Lippok was encouraged to sue Uselmann for assault.

In civil proceedings on April 15, the prosecutor argued before the Rüsselsheim district court for an acquittal because no evidence of injury had been presented during two days of legal proceedings. The day before, the Darmstadt Labour Court ruled in Uselmann’s favour. Consequently, Opel was ordered to rehire the sacked steward in Rüsselsheim and pay him

for lost earnings since October 2014.

The legal proceedings, however, provided a glimpse of the severe stress and increasing strain that GM-Opel workers are subjected to at the Rüsselsheim plant. “There seems to be a harsh work climate at Opel,” the prosecutor said, in a gross understatement, in her presentation to the court.

A master craftsman who testified at length provided details of the conditions on the production line. This includes so-called “swine stations”, i.e., jobs that are the most stressful and demanding. Workers often drop out for health reasons and workers who retire are not replaced. Instead, open positions are filled with temporary and contract workers who are poorly trained and highly exploited.

These appalling conditions are not limited to Opel Rüsselsheim. The situation at Opel has steadily worsened in recent years as a result of factory closures, layoffs and breaking down work rules in what is known as “optimisation”.

This is the way the Opel Group is seeking to maintain its position in the highly competitive auto market. The closure of its plant in Antwerp in 2010 was followed at the end of 2014 by the closure of Opel’s Bochum plant with 3,000 layoffs. Since then, Rüsselsheim workers have had to build both the Insignia and the Zafira models partly on the same production line.

The competitive struggle is being conducted on the backs of the workers. Work on the production line is carried out standing up, with prolonged noise and under time pressure. This leads to sleep disorders, illness and other maladies, which particularly affect older workers. A recent study by the Institute for Employment Research (IAB) found that older shift workers in car production often suffer significantly more illnesses than other workers.

The undermining of workers' work conditions and health is the direct result of the collaboration of the IG Metall trade union and works council with Opel management. Far from defending workers, these pro-management institutions fully share the cost-cutting objectives of the Opel board.

This is especially true for the current Group Works Council chairman, Dr. Wolfgang Schäfer-Klug. "Our growth strategy has always been a key demand of the works council and IG Metall," he recently told the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in an interview headlined, "We are again the winners". Dr. Schäfer-Klug has nothing but flattery and enthusiastic praise for Opel Chief Executive Officer Karl-Thomas Neumann. Under his management, things had "decisively changed for the positive", the works council chairman said, adding, "We employees notice this personally."

IG Metall and their works council representatives divide workers by playing one location against another. They supported the closure of the Bochum plant as part of the so-called "master collective agreement", suppressing any resistance by workers. The growing pressure on Rüsselsheim workers is a direct result of the drive to boost profits by IG Metall, which works as a direct tool of management.



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