Germany: IG Metall union sabotages workers' struggle to defend jobs

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Opel auto workers in Germany are experiencing the same problems as workers all over the world, with corporate management demanding massive cuts in jobs and wages, combined with a drastic deterioration of working conditions.

For its part, Germany's largest union, IG Metall, and its works councils are working closely with management to sabotage any serious resistance. The union plays off one factory and location against another, threatens workers who oppose cuts and helps to organise redundancies and social cuts.

Last Tuesday, the shareholder meeting of PSA took place near Paris. The French group, which also includes the auto brands Peugeot, Citroën and DS, took over Opel last summer in an attempt to counter the dominance of Volkswagen in the European car market. The acquisition was associated with a radical austerity plan involving cuts of €1.7 billion per annum.

PSA boss Carlos Tavares told shareholders that restructuring negotiations for Germany's Opel plants would drag on for some weeks because IG Metall needed more time to do its work. "Do not be surprised, there will be some backlash," Tavares declared. "This is part of what has to be done to bring this company back on track to profits." The company's talks with IG Metall are already well advanced.

Tavares noted that in the United Kingdom, Poland, Spain, Hungary and Austria, deals had already been reached with trade unions. PSA shareholders rewarded him for his radical re-organization course with a special bonus of €1 million.

Parallel to the shareholders meeting in France, IG Metall organised a protest action at the Opel plant in Eisenach. At the union rally, works council and union officials loudly criticised Tavares and the new Opel boss, Michael Lohscheller, accusing them of blackmail. At the same time, they emphasised that there was no alternative to the "Pace" recovery plan they had agreed with Tavares, which involved attacks on jobs and wages. According to the Pace plan, only the planned savings could reduce labour costs and increase competitiveness.

The union thereby supports job cuts. All it demands is that such cuts be implemented in a "socially acceptable" manner. Everyone knows what this means. Redundancies are to be organised in a manner that allows resistance on the part of workers to be controlled and suppressed. In fact, the planned halving of the workforce at Eisenach (current workforce of 1,790) is the first step to closing the factory completely. This is made clear by the withdrawal from the factory of the company's Adam and Corsa models.

Job cuts are also planned at the concern's factories in Rüsselsheim and Kaiserslautern: By the end of this year 4,000 jobs are to go out of a total of 18,600, and half of the 7,700 jobs at the Rüsselsheim development centre are due to be axed by 2020.

In December 2017 and January of this year contracts for several hundred temporary workers were terminated. Short-time working has been taking place since January, and the executive and works council have launched an aggressive programme of redundancy payments linked to partial and early retirement. In addition, Opel has terminated many contracts with its 1,600 dealers throughout Europe.

In addition, the PSA/Opel management is calling for massive wage cuts. The last agreed wage increase will not to be paid until further notice, and Christmas, holiday pay and any additional allowances are to be either decreased or cut entirely. This is a pre-condition for any new investment at existing plants.

The unions have already approved massive cuts in other European plants.

In France, the PSA group currently employs about 26,000 workers in four major auto plants: Sochaux (10,500), Mulhouse (7,500), Poissy near Paris (4,500) and Rennes (4,000). In cooperation with the unions, older workers with job protection contracts have been dismissed in large numbers and replaced by temporary workers, many of whom earn less than half the wages of those who have lost their jobs.

At the British Vauxhall plants in Ellesmere Port and Luton, an extensive flexibilisation of working hours plus drastic increases in workloads have been agreed. Unions in

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Poland, Hungary and Austria also agreed to significantly worse working conditions.

Now the trade unions of these countries, which are closely linked to IG Metall on a European and works council level, are accusing the German union of a lack of solidarity because it is not enforcing the cuts in German plants quickly enough!

The auto unions in Spain, France and the UK have sharply criticised IG Metall's unwillingness to agree to the cuts demanded, according to Europe-autonews.com. The stance taken by IGM has led to significant tensions between the European trade unions.

The magazine cites an official of the British Unite union, who declared that workers in Luton were "dismayed" by the failure of their German colleagues to make sacrifices similar to their own in order to ensure the company's profitability. IG Metall's unwillingness to approve the required measures undermines trade union solidarity, the British union argues. A representative of the French Force Ouvrière union also said: "The French unions will not allow their workers to bear the main burden of a third competitiveness plan."

The role of the unions could hardly be clearer. When they speak of solidarity, they do not mean the mobilisation of workers in all factories against the attacks mounted by the company, but rather cooperation between union officials and management in implementing attacks on jobs and wages.

At the same time, the criticisms of IG Metall are completely unjustified. Along with Unite in the UK or Force Ouvrière (FO) in France, the German union works closely with the company executive, Even prior to the acquisition of Opel by PSA, IGM had engaged in intensive discussions with the company, envisaging the gradual closure of entire plants, such as the one in Eisenach, which has its own long history and tradition.

Similar conspiratorial collaboration between the unions and management already led to the closure of an Opel plant in Amsterdam nine years ago, and the decommissioning of the Opel factory in Bochum five years ago. IG Metall itself worked on the closure plans and advised management on how best to prevent serious resistance.

Today it uses its apparatus to divide workers in Europe and play them off against each other. The unions regard job cuts, part time hours, wage cuts and plant closures as restructuring measures required to reduce overcapacity and make the European car industry more competitive.

In reality, auto workers are being forced to pay for the crisis of the capitalist profit system. Along with auto companies, other corporations are imposing the crisis on the working class, reversing the rights and gains won by generations of workers.

Following the reintroduction of capitalism in Eastern Europe and China, starvation wages in these countries were systematically used to reduce labour costs in the rest of the world. In the US, the Obama administration restructured the auto industry years ago, destroying tens of thousands of jobs, annulling pension rights and cutting entry wages by half. Now the same process is underway in Europe.

At the same time, economic and military conflicts between the major powers are growing. The unions respond by closing ranks even more intensely with their "own" governments and supporting their policies of military rearmament.

In this situation, the defence of jobs, wages and social rights is crucial and requires a break with the unions.

Workers who seriously want to defend jobs must join forces and found independent workers' committees to prepare and lead resistance to layoffs and plant closures, and establish contact with workers at other plants and locations. They must organise strikes, protests and factory occupations completely independently of the unions.

The defence of jobs must become the starting point for a broad political mobilisation based on a revolutionary socialist programme. The enrichment of an insatiable tiny elite at the expense of the livelihood of millions of workers is the clearest evidence of the failure of the capitalist system—and not just in Germany. In the United States, three billionaires—Jeff Bezos (Amazon), Bill Gates (Microsoft) and investor Warren Buffett—control the same wealth as the poorest half of the American population. In Germany there are 114 billionaires.

Under these circumstances, anyone who claims it is possible to defend jobs and at the same time defend capitalism, as do the unions, the SPD and the Left Party, is lying to workers. Jobs can be defended only on the basis of a socialist programme that places the expropriation of the banks and major concerns at its centre.

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