

German automaker Opel to cut a further 1,100 jobs

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In accordance with the tactic of divide and conquer, German automaker Opel and the works council are imposing round after round of attacks on autoworkers. Shortly before the plants closed for the summer holiday, news emerged that 1,100 jobs will be cut in Rüsselsheim, Eisenach and Kaiserslautern.

Job cuts have already been underway at the company's International Centre for Research and Development (ITEZ) for a year. Up to 700 engineers and technicians are to transfer to the French services company Segula, while a further 2,000 will lose their jobs. It remains entirely unclear what the approximately 6,000 workers will confront when they return from holiday in August.

Last year, Opel cut 3,700 jobs across its locations. An additional 600 jobs will now be added to this in Rüsselsheim, coinciding with the 120th anniversary of the Rüsselsheim plant. At the same time, 200 jobs will go at the Eisenach facility in the state of Thuringia, while up to 300 jobs could be lost in the parts plant in Kaiserslautern.

Overall, this means that since being taken over by PSA, one in three out of Opel's 19,000 workforce has lost their job. Out of a total global workforce of 38,000, over 8,000 jobs had been cut by the end of last year.

The job cuts are part of the "Pace!" restructuring programme. Two years ago, the French automaker PSA (Peugeot, Citroen, DS) purchased Opel and Vauxhall from GM, and the works council and IG Metall trade union voted in favour of "Pace!" They also praised PSA head Carlos Tavares to the skies.

The *World Socialist Web Site* warned at the time, "There is much to suggest that the sale will be the prelude to a comprehensive restructuring programme. Opel currently employs some 38,200 in Europe, more than half of whom work in Germany. The PSA

takeover could result in more than 6,000 people losing their jobs." This has been fully confirmed.

Although these plans were fully worked out from the beginning, they have only gradually come to light. This is exactly what auto industry expert Ferdinand Dudenhöffer said on ZDF in July 2018, when he noted that the board and the union "intentionally didn't announce everything at once," because otherwise "they feared triggering a revolution or strike."

IG Metall and the works council have played a central role for years in imposing job cuts as seamlessly as possible. Immediately after the PSA takeover, IG Metall and works council officials travelled to Paris to offer PSA chief executive Tavares their "loyal collaboration."

On February 21, 2017, the IG Metall website published a "joint statement from the central works council, IG Metall, and the European Opel/Vauxhall Central Works Council" in which the union praised the "confidential and honest talks." With "confidential" they meant to say—behind the backs of the workforce.

Since then, the works council and IG Metall have supported the elimination of thousands of jobs, the laying off of thousands of contract workers, and the imposition of work rules and wage concessions at every plant. Prior to that, they were jointly involved in imposing the closure of Opel plants in Antwerp and Bochum.

In January, there was a change in the position of human resources head at Opel, with Ralph Wangemann, who has worked in management for 20 years, becoming director of human resources and labour. He is tasked with leading the entire human resources department for Opel and Vauxhall. His job is to collaborate with the works council to accelerate the restructuring measures and job cuts.

Several weeks later, the central works council also announced a change in leadership. Wolfgang Schäfer-klug, who led the central works council for seven years, resigned and handed the post to his deputy, Uwe Baum. It remains unclear whether Schäfer-klug will be rewarded with a high paying management job, like many other union bureaucrats.

Schäfer-klug said he would focus on leading the works council in Rüsselsheim and the European works council. This can only be taken to mean that further deep cuts are planned at the company's facilities. Baum, the new central works council leader, is known as a hard-liner who suppresses all critical opposition.

The IG Metall and works council's ruthless manoeuvres have been known for a long time. As appendages of the company boards, they are chiefly concerned with increasing productivity and profits. They subordinate the interests of the workers and the entire workforce to the profit interests of the company. Their goal is to support company management and shareholders in their global struggle with competitors.

The entire auto industry is being restructured due to factors such as the trade war with the United States, Brexit, and the weak Turkish lira (pushing down profits from exports). In addition, there is the expensive transition to electric vehicles and digital technology. The company knows no other way to protect their profits apart from imposing concessions on the backs of workers.

Two years ago, PSA CEO Tavares declared, "The only thing that protects workers' jobs is profit." However, according to company finances from July 2019, PSA's losses continue to mount. In the first six months of 2019, PSA's four brands sold a combined 1.9 million vehicles, 12.8 percent less than the same period in 2018. The latest round of job cuts was announced at about the same time.

The media never tires of noting that the cuts will be implemented through "voluntary" measures. There will be no compulsory redundancies, so the story goes, only part-time work for elderly workers, early retirement programmes and buyouts. This is utter nonsense, since it does not apply to contract workers, who can be laid off overnight. Secondly, the jobs eliminated through "social contracts" are lost forever. This, above all, destroys the future prospects for the younger generation. Only a handful of trainees are hired

permanently.

Thirdly, the early retirement measures merely mean that elderly, better paid workers are forced out of the plants, to be replaced by younger workers able to work harder for less. In Kaiserslautern, the early retirement programme is currently being expanded to workers aged 58.

Measures are also being enforced at the ITEZ research centre in Rüsselsheim. At least 1,340 workers have accepted their departure from the centre, either through buyouts, early retirement or part-time work. Only 140 have volunteered to be transferred to Segula. After the holiday, a further 500 workers are expected to be forced out. If they refuse to work for Segula, Opel management has threatened that their jobs will be lost for good and they will have no right to a buyout.

As the WSWS has been arguing for some time, jobs, wages and working conditions can only be defended if the workers break free from the control of the union bureaucracy. They must build action committees entirely independently of IG Metall and coordinate their struggle internationally.

The problems confronted by Opel workers are the same as those faced by workers at VW, Ford and the other automakers and parts suppliers. They can only be resolved if workers take up the struggle for socialism, i.e., for a rationally planned economy under workers' control directed towards meeting the needs of the entire population—workers as well as car owners—not the profit demands of shareholders.

This is the programme fought for by the WSWS and its Autoworker Newsletter.



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