

Germany: Opel workers support GM strike in the US

Our reporters
26 September 2019

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* visited Opel's main plant in Rüsselsheim last week to speak with workers about the strike of 46,000 American GM workers that had started on Monday. Until two years ago, Opel was part of General Motors.

News of the strike in the US has been met with great interest by Opel workers in Germany. "Such an indefinite strike, that's quite something," said Kerim, leaving his shift with a colleague. "When did this last happen here?" his colleague added. "Such a strike, we can forget that here with the IG Metall [union]."

When asked, the worker said, "the IG Metall is no longer what it was here thirty years ago, when workers fought for better wages and the 35-hour week. But what remains of all that? Even then, Zwickel sold out our fight," he added, referring to former IG Metall (IGM) leader Klaus Zwickel.

Workers were interested to hear that the strike in the United States had to be pushed through against the leadership of the UAW trade union, which is mired deep in corruption and is doing everything it can to halt the strike as soon as possible. The *World Socialist Web Site* has proposed the creation of action committees that would lead the fight internationally, independently of the nationalist trade unions.

"The whole fight today is global," said Jonathan, a younger temporary worker. "They are even having to make cuts at Daimler." He said he had read that Mercedes was now introducing "early retirement and partial retirement". At Opel, staff were being cut everywhere, and temporary workers were the hardest hit, he added. A worker from the Opel service provider Rhenus Logistik reported that another 106 colleagues will be dismissed next month. "That is fifty per cent of us."

Opel was taken over by the French PSA group two

years ago and is currently undergoing a radical restructuring and cuts program.

A warehouse worker confirmed what the WSWs has already reported, that 200 jobs are also to be cut in this area. "Then we may move to Bochum into the goods distribution centre," he said. "But I have my family here. Also, we would no longer be paid there according to the Opel contract rate but the logistics contract."

The worker added, "When it came to Opel's 'future contract' [introducing major restructuring], they were all there with Merkel: Bouffier, Malu Dreyer and Bodo Ramelow [the state premiers of Hesse, Rhineland-Palatinate and Thuringia]—and where are they now?" Under PSA, a clear concept was recognizable, "They replace expensive permanent workers with temporary workers, whom they can throw out at any time."

Apparently, only one shift is being worked currently at Rüsselsheim; only the morning shift runs in the factory, while the "late shift" stays at home. "However, they still receive their basic salary," a worker reported. "Starting in October, this should then transfer into short-time working. In plain language this means that wages fall drastically and that the Employment Office will take over the largest chunk, in other words, all workers."

"That's what they call a test phase," says Valentin, an elderly worker from Kazakhstan who only agreed to talk when he learns that the WSWs has nothing to do with the IG Metall. "Everything has been agreed with the works council," he adds. He said he had recently resigned from the IG Metall. "First, out of the IG Metall, and now out of the factory as a whole," since he had recently signed his termination agreement.

PSA and IG Metall are also currently showing their hand at the International Technical Development Centre (ITEZ). No fewer than 27 workers were

“released” there at a moment’s notice because they had refused to transfer to the French development service provider Segula. There too, a lot of jobs are being lost. As a result many Opel employees have cancelled their IG Metall membership.

“We really should strike here,” many workers said in response to news of the strike in the US. “We only ever learn about what is coming our way piecemeal, according to the salami tactic,” says Horst, an assembly worker. “We are the last to know what’s going on here.” News of the strike by GM workers in the US was also new to most Opel workers. They had not heard about it from the German media or the IG Metall.

“What has become of IG Metall” asks Willy rhetorically, a retiree who was going to the sports hall at the plant. He had been an “IG Metall shop steward until his last working day.” He emphasized, “Of course we stand in solidarity with our colleagues in the United States. Global solidarity—that’s the only thing we have. What else is available to us?” As he leaves, he says that IG Metall was “really only making shit.”

A discussion developed about the future of the auto industry with one worker. Thomas, who works for a supplier company, pointed out that managers at the IAA [International Auto Exhibition] had all stressed, “We are in crisis.” Thomas said they had all demanded that “payroll costs be lowered.” In addition, switching to electric cars was creating great uncertainty and chaos.

“Cities are banning diesel. Sales figures are falling. And honestly, does it make sense for everyone to switch to e-cars now?,” Thomas asked. “For the environment, what would be most favourable is a good public transport concept that relies on the train—which already runs with electricity. But the car lobby is preventing it.” He pointed out that all this has long been known. “There were discussions fifty years ago. But the oil industry prevented any meaningful decisions being taken.”

The corporations played off the workers against each other, he observed. “They say, ‘If you don’t speed up, then we’ll go abroad.’ These are all global corporations.” Thomas was interested to learn that the WSWS was calling for a global strategy. “That really should be the job of the unions. But they don’t want international cooperation. They all only look to their own country and their own production locations.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact