Opel/Stellantis: Job cuts and intensified pressure on the workforce

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On May 26 workers at the main Opel Autos factory in Rüsselsheim took part in a protest against ongoing job cuts and a massive increase in work pressure. The German IG Metall trade union called for a rally at the end of the morning shift in an effort to allow workers to vent their anger. Currently, one part of the workforce is slaving away under great pressure, while others continue to work reduced hours (with reduced pay) in line with the government's coronavirus short-time working scheme.

Since January, the Opel plants now belong to the new car giant Stellantis, the product of the merger of the PSA Group, to which Opel belongs, with Fiat-Chrysler (FCA). The merger has been accompanied by massive attacks on workers' jobs and conditions.

The new corporate giant is in the process of converting to electric-mobility and digital driving and is intent on cutting costs to maintain its position as the world's third largest auto concern based on sales. The process of conversion to e-mobility involves the destruction of thousands of jobs. At the time of the merger in January, PSA boss Carlos Tavares announced, "From day one, we will focus on exploiting synergies and increasing competitiveness."

One of the first steps Stellantis has taken is to dissolve its entire network of authorised dealers and terminate all European dealership contracts as of May 31. Only Opel, Fiat, Peugeot or Vauxhall dealers who receive a so-called Letter of Intent (LoI) by mid-July will continue to be supplied—and only then under stricter conditions.

Five billion euros are to be saved per year at the company, and no job is safe. At Opel, IG Metall has already agreed to eliminate 2,100 jobs by the end of this year and another 2,000 jobs by the end of the decade. This means that out of 19,000 employees employed in Opel factories when PSA took over in 2017, only 8,100 will remain—less than half.

The union patted itself on the back, claiming that the 2,100 jobs to be cut would be "voluntary," via severance payments and early retirement. Under pandemic conditions, however, only 500 workers were persuaded to leave their jobs "voluntarily." Consequently, the company executive and IG Metall set up a "transfer company," which is invariably the prelude to compulsory redundancies.

Although the Opel-Blitz model is to be retained, the Rüsselsheim factory will inevitably be downsized. The local newspaper Main-Spitze posed the question: "Is Rüsselsheim to be downsized to the level of a 'token' factory?"

Pressure on autoworkers is being sharply intensified and workers have undergone prolong periods of short-time working since the start of the pandemic. Currently, only one shift is operational and the reintroduction of a second shift, announced for this autumn, is by no means certain.

What has already been imposed in American auto plants is now to be introduced in Rüsselsheim; increased "flexibilisation" of working time, which eliminates the eight-hour day—an important achievement in the last century. In addition, depending on demand, a six-day week will be reintroduced at Opel's main factory.

At the Stellantis plant in Sterling Heights near Detroit, a new working-time system for skilled tradesmen was introduced at the beginning of April that permits twelve-hour shifts and a seven-day week. The United Auto Workers (UAW) agreed to this murderous system.

One half of the workforce is expected to be made redundant in the Opel departments of tooling and

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prototype construction, parts warehouses and design workshops. In these departments, workers are already being asked by their supervisors to apply internally for different posts, although they have not yet been laid off.

Employment in the development department, which once employed 7,000, will be especially affected by job cuts. Two thousand jobs have already been eliminated during the last three years, and 750 workers were forced to switch to the French development service provider Segula, where Opel plans to cut at least another 600-800 jobs.

Pressure is being exerted more and more openly by management, increasingly at the expense of established rights and protocols. For example, several employees were dismissed because they refused to transfer to Segula. The Hesse Labour Court recently ruled in favour of the eight dismissed employees and against Opel. The workers had sued against their dismissal, which has now been negated, although Opel may appeal at the Federal Labour Court.

Recent developments at Segula demonstrate that the workers were right to refuse transfer. The development company, which took over the 750 ex-Opel employees with a job guarantee until 2023, now wants to get rid of 100 jobs and has no compunctions about imposing compulsory redundancies. The company works council had played its part in ensuring that more than 1,300 employees who did not want to switch to Segula lost their jobs at Opel via severance payments.

When it comes to the conversion to electro-mobility and digital driving, the company is not motivated by preserving jobs. What counts is not the welfare and security of the employees or what is necessary for society or the climate. The only thing that matters are the portfolios of company shareholders and the banks, based on maximum profitability.

To defend their jobs and health and create decent conditions for all, workers must take independent action and join the Network of Action Committees for Safe Workplaces. The *World Socialist Web Site* advocates the building of action committees to establish links between workers in different plants and countries. Stellantis has 25 production facilities in Europe alone and around 400,000 workers worldwide, all facing similar threats.

The company's connections extend to Asia. To equip the cars digitally, Stellantis has not only signed a contract with Google, but has also set up a new company ("Mobile Drive") with the Taiwanese tech group and mobile phone manufacturer Foxconn. This means that autoworkers and developers have the opportunity to connect with colleagues in the US, in Asia and around the world. The decisive factor is political perspective. The defence of jobs requires globally coordinated action by workers in different countries. It must be based on a socialist and international programme and resolutely reject the trade union policy of divide and rule.

IG Metall has both feet planted in the camp of management and shareholders. Opel personnel manager Ralph Wangemann recently reaffirmed this. He told the Main-Spitze newspaper that Opel could not understand the purpose of the protest on May 26. He declared that the executive had "implemented the imperative restructuring measures of the past years in line with the applicable contracts on a voluntary basis and the reduction of 2,100 jobs with the agreement of IG Metall."

IG Metall is indispensable for Opel/Stellantis' plans to impose further attacks on the workforce. With the help of the union, it has already succeeded in closing Opel plants in Antwerp and Bochum and slashing many thousands of jobs without triggering a social uprising. To forestall opposition time and again, IG Metall and its works councils have stirred up nationalism and played off workers at different plants against one another.

One plant that may currently be facing closure, and which IG Metall completely ignores, is the Opel plant in Aspern, east of Vienna. The factory employed 3,000 workers in the 1990s. Today there are just 800. Half a year ago, engine production came to a halt and now the massive Opel hall, almost a kilometre long and one of the largest production halls in Europe, is up for sale.

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