

Rally at Germany's Opel/Stellantis shows need for workers to break with IG Metall union

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Germany's biggest trade union, IG Metall, made two things clear at a rally it held on 28 May under the slogan, "A future only with us": the merger recently concluded by Stellantis is the prelude to massive and unprecedented attacks on the rights and jobs of auto workers, which will be carried out with the consent of the union. Instead of conducting a struggle against the merger and its consequences, IG Metall and its network of works councils and shop stewards are ensuring that the company's assault is implemented smoothly.

Since 2017, Opel-Vauxhall had been part of the French PSA group. In January of this year, the latter merged with Fiat-Chrysler to form the huge Stellantis corporation. Since the merger, the tempo of job cuts has accelerated. By 2030, jobs at Opel will be reduced by 50 percent compared to 2017.

This is despite the fact that Opel returned a profit last year. Nonetheless, the IG Metall works council has made further concessions, such as accepting the reduction of break times, stepped-up work rates and a reduction in the number of apprenticeships. For one part of the workforce, reduced work hours will continue until the end of the year. For all workers, pressure on production lines is increasing due to a labour force shortage caused by the company and union's policy of enforced "voluntary" termination agreements.

The ITEZ (International Technical Development Centre) in Rüsselsheim has been particularly affected. Two thousand jobs have been cut in the Centre and 750 engineers and other workers forced to switch to the service provider, Segula, which now plans to shed 100 of them. Contrary to the terms of agreed contracts, there is now the threat of compulsory redundancies.

On Radio Rüsselsheim, workers reported during the rally that "sometimes they work to the point of burn-out." Meanwhile, others have been forced to accept reduced hours and pay. Still others reported constant fear of being laid off. While there is a huge amount of work to do in the

departments, one noted, the threat of dismissal hangs "like a sword of Damocles."

At the rally, Ulrike Obermayr a leading representative of IG Metall Darmstadt, openly admitted: "The only thing that counts internally at Opel is job cuts."

Workers are being put under massive pressure to leave the company. The factory stewards at the central spare parts warehouse in Bochum said, "Stellantis wanted to play us off against our colleagues in the French and Italian warehouses, blackmail us into giving up Christmas and holiday bonuses and extend working hours without wage compensation." The central spare parts warehouse is all that remains from the closure of the Opel auto plant in Bochum.

In this situation, the IGM officials and works councillors could offer no way forward for Opel workers. Far from giving even the appearance of militancy, the bureaucrats repeatedly stressed how reliably IG Metall was sticking to the "rules of the game" and said that they expected the same from the Stellantis management. Their main focus was not on the welfare of the workforce, but rather the future of the Opel brand.

Christiane Benner, deputy chair of IG Metall, claimed: "You have been fighting for many years to ensure the traditional Opel brand has a future." Only well motivated employees can "build good autos. And that is what you want to do, colleagues!" She then spoke of "painful cuts" and referred by name to "my colleagues Bernd Lösche and Thorsten Zangerle" (the works council chairmen at the Opel factories in Eisenach and Kaiserslautern), as well as the Rüsselsheim works stewards Wolfgang Schäfer-Klug and Uwe Baum. She assured the audience: "We stick to agreements! That must also apply to the other side (...) Then we will get back to work so that things can move forward for the Opel brand."

Benner's remarks were clearly addressed to the Opel and Stellantis management. A few days ago, Opel boss Michael Lohscheller declared: "We have to work harder and with a

much louder voice for Opel,” otherwise investments at Stellantis would “go somewhere else.”

Based on her influence and income, Christiane Benner has nothing in common with the working class, but rather belongs to the elite of the German car industry. She is both number two in IG Metall and a member of the SPD, as well as deputy chair of the supervisory board of Continental and a member of the supervisory board of BMW. Both positions are remunerated at 200,000 euros a year.

Wolfgang Schäfer-Klug, head of the works council at Opel-Rüsselsheim, also had nothing of genuine substance to say to the workers, who stood listening in the pouring rain with motionless faces. Only about 300 to 400 attended the rally, a fact the union tried to blame on management, which added two part-time workdays to the schedule at short notice.

Schäfer-Klug spoke of the “inhumane working conditions” that now prevail, but openly admitted that the works council in Rüsselsheim is working with the executive board to cut 2,100 jobs, claiming merely that this was being done “on a voluntary basis.” His only demand was that no extra pressure be put on workers in the process. There had been a “breakdown in morale,” he complained. Employees felt bullied and Germany’s system of worker-management co-determination was not being respected, he declared.

Schäfer-Klug summarised precisely the situation he and his organisation have brought about over the course of years. It is frequently trade union shop stewards who put pressure on workers to “voluntarily” sign termination agreements and yield hard-won gains. At the same time, they seek to dissipate discontent in the workforce with toothless stunts and protests.

For years, the works council and IG Metall have demonstrated their reliability to Opel management. Immediately after the takeover by PSA, Schäfer-Klug took part in secret talks with PSA boss Carlos Tavares and then signed a so-called “contract for the future” called PACE. The contract involved slashing thousands of jobs. Since then, Schäfer-Klug has handed over the chairmanship of the joint works council to Uwe Baum, but still heads the Rüsselsheim and European works councils.

Following the merger with Stellantis, CEO Tavares recently increased the company’s demands, insisting that five billion euros in annual savings are needed in order to remain competitive on the world market. This was subsequently accepted and implemented by the company management. On top of all this, IG Metall conducts a nationalist policy of isolating and playing off one section of workers against another, all the while hypocritically claiming, “We are all sitting in the same boat.”

This strategy was backed by a number of prominent politicians at the May 28 rally. A message of greetings was

read out from the premier of the state of Thuringia Bodo Ramelow (Left Party), who wished “that a good German brand also has a good tone, and a good tone includes good treatment of one’s own employees. Declarations of conflict don’t get us anywhere.”

Malu Dreyer (SPD), premier of Rhineland-Palatinate, declared in her welcoming address that she spoke, “with the deepest conviction for strong social partnership.” The premier of Hesse, Volker Bouffier (CDU), also praised social partnership and warned in a written statement of the necessity of avoiding any “antagonism.” The message is: in order to defend the “good German brand Opel,” workers have to lower their expectations, make even more sacrifices and, above all, respect the union’s control over them.

The rally made very clear that this is not the way to stop the increasingly brutal attacks on workers. Instead, Opel workers are being systematically turned against their colleagues who face exactly the same problems at Vauxhall, Peugeot, Citroen, Fiat, Chrysler and elsewhere. These efforts to keep the working class divided are being deepened at the very moment when the merger brings together 400,000 workers from Europe, America and Asia in the new multinational Stellantis.

This is why the *World Socialist Web Site* calls upon workers to unite independently of the nationalist unions into action committees that fight across all borders to defend jobs and conditions. To this end, the WSWs advocates the building of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

The rally was attended by a delegation of airport workers from WISAG who had come to appeal for solidarity from Opel workers. They too have had bitter experiences at the hands of the German trade union movement (DGB) and the service workers union Verdi, which did nothing to oppose the workers illegal dismissal from Frankfurt airport. The WISAG workers subsequently quit the union and laid a funeral wreath in front of the Verdi headquarters in Frankfurt.



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