Germany: Opel (Stellantis) raises pressure on employees

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Despite the pandemic, the automaker Stellantis, which includes Opel, massively increased its net profit to 5.9 billion euros in the first half of 2021. At the same time, Opel management and the works councils are putting workers under increasing pressure.

Employees at the Opel International Technical Development Center (ITEZ) in Rüsselsheim were the latest to be confronted with this. Engineers from research and development and employees from the forge, of the design department and of the tool and prototype construction departments received letters from Opel personnel manager Ralph Wangemann in which they are asked to look for another job within the group—or to "voluntarily" take their leave. This was reported by the news service Business Insider.

Business Insider also quoted the passage in the letter in which Wangemann insists that every measure threatened lies expressly "within the framework of the procedure agreed upon by the works council." The works council immediately distanced itself from this statement in an internal handout and described the management's actions as "unacceptable." But who are they trying to fool? This amounts to a feeble attempt to cover their tracks.

As every worker knows, the works council and IG Metall union at Opel signed an agreement to cut 2,100 further jobs by the end of the year. At the time of the takeover by PSA Group in 2017 the union had already signed a so-called "future contract" called PACE! which doomed thousands of jobs to dissolution. Within ten years, half of the 19,000 jobs existing at the time were to be axed, and these plans are being mercilessly implemented. The merger of PSA with Fiat Chrysler (FCA) last January to form Stellantis is further propelling the process.

The media are presently bursting with praise for outgoing Opel CEO Michael Lohscheller, who is leaving the Stellantis Group to lead an electric car company in Vietnam. Lohscheller is celebrated for taking the Opel-Vauxhall group out of the red and into the black over the past four years since its acquisition by PSA. Over the past three years he has produced a cumulative profit of 2.5 billion euros.

There are two things to say about this: first, it is the Opel and Vauxhall workers who are bearing the cost in the form of layoffs, wage sacrifices, and grueling workloads. And second, every single step has proceeded in close consultation with the union.

Even before the merger with Opel, the top managers of Groupe PSA and Opel-Vauxhall met with the leading German union leaders, IG Metall chairman Jörg Hofmann and then-Opel works council chairman Wolfgang Schäfer-Klug. At the time, the group's website stated that "in constructive talks" and "in close cooperation with the European Works Council and IG Metall," the course was being set for a "European automotive champion with German-French roots." The unions enthusiastically welcomed the Stellantis merger to become the world's fourth-largest auto group.

Both Schäfer-Klug, who still heads the European Works Council, and the current head of Opel's General Works Council, Uwe Baum, hold high-paying posts on the supervisory board of Opel Automobile GmbH. They have long been privy to all restructuring plans. These include the conversion of the main plant in Rüsselsheim to electric mobility, as well as the effective dismantling of the ITEZ, which just a few years ago employed around 7,000 workers.

Today, the ITEZ has 3,000 employees, less than half of what it once had, and the job cuts keep coming. During the plant recess in July, workers even discovered that machines and tools from their halls

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were being sold off on eBay. Several hundred workers have already been forced to transfer to the French development services provider Segula, and Opel's forging and transmission divisions are scheduled to close entirely by the end of 2021.

Unionized works councils are feverishly promoting the “voluntary” abandonment of jobs via severance pay, partial retirement, early retirement and a specially-created internal transfer company. As recently as the end of May, Wolfgang Schäfer-Klug claimed at an IG Metall rally in Rüsselsheim that any job cuts would be made exclusively “on a voluntary basis.” Wangemann's threats now show the value of those promises. If not enough workers come forward “voluntarily,” the thumbscrews of layoffs for “operational reasons” are ready. In either case, the jobs will be lost for future generations.

It is for this reason that the *World Socialist Web Site* and the German section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (SGP), propose that workers create action committees that can fight independently of unions to defend jobs. We urge workers to take the fight for their interests into their own hands.

In an analysis of the Stellantis merger, the WSWS pointed out that auto workers around the world are forced to work in difficult and dangerous conditions because there is supposedly no money for their needs, while Stellantis’ top managers and shareholders rake in fabulous profits and multi-million-dollar bonuses.

We said, “To wage a successful fight against the transnational corporations, workers need new organizations of struggle, independent of the nationalist unions, and an internationalist strategy to unify their struggles, uniting every nationality, ethnicity and race.”

This perspective is based firmly in contemporary reality. Around the world, there is a rising tide of radical strikes and labor struggles. Just two years ago at General Motors (to which Opel belonged for nearly 90 years), the first national strike in decades by 46,000 auto workers occurred in the US. In the state of Virginia this summer, Volvo workers carried out five weeks of industrial action against the will of the United Auto Workers union (UAW). They formed an independent action committee in the course of this struggle.

The union officials are not only deeply corrupted and integrated into the management structures; they are also, by their history and function, intimately tied to capitalism and nation-states. They divide workers based on which country a plant is located and play them off against each other.

Globalization is far advanced. This can be seen and felt at every turn in the auto industry. This is why workers must unite internationally. They must wrest production and advanced technology from the profit interests of the financial aristocracy and put them at the service of society. No one else will do it for them.

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