

The destruction of Opel in Germany: A new stage in the attack on autoworkers

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When the merger of Opel's parent company PSA with Fiat-Chrysler Automobiles (FCA) was announced in January, launching Stellantis as the fourth largest automaker in the world, the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote:

"The €43 billion (\$53 billion) merger, first announced in 2019, will have far-reaching consequences throughout the auto industry and heralds an intensified assault on workers' jobs internationally..."

This is exactly what is happening now. The decision by Stellantis head Carlos Tavares to dismantle the Opel network and transform the Opel plants in Eisenach and Rüsselsheim into independent companies is intended to accelerate job cuts and attacks on benefits and working conditions and initiate the gradual shutdown of the plants.

The decision is directed not only against Opel workers. It is related to massive attacks on the employees of automakers and parts suppliers throughout Europe and around the world.

VW boss Herbert Diess announced the elimination of 30,000 jobs at a supervisory board meeting last Tuesday. Ford Germany boss Gunnar Herrmann has stated that the Ford factory in Saarlouis is on the verge of shutting down and has a future only if the employees are willing to make extremely far-reaching concessions. He is demanding "gigantic flexibility" from the autoworkers.

The financial daily *Handelsblatt* was the first to report Stellantis' Opel plans. Under the headline "More penetration, less co-determination," the business paper wrote that the main issue was to rationalize the mammoth group, which has 14 different car brands (Peugeot, Citroën, DS, Opel, Vauxhall, Fiat, Lancia, Alfa Romeo, Maserati, Abarth, Chrysler, Dodge, Ram and Jeep), "with the help of maximum centralization."

In view of increasing competition on the global auto market and the pressure of shareholders for ever higher returns, management wants to closely examine all areas of the company, impose restructuring, reduce social standards and impose low wages.

With the help of the trade unions, workers at one location are already being played off against workers at other locations. Short-time work has been announced for three months at the Eisenach assembly plant, which is widely understood as an initial step in the total shutdown of the facility. The global

semiconductor shortage was invoked as a pretext, while production was relocated to Sochaux in France, where the workers have to work unpaid Saturday shifts.

An Opel spokesman explained to *Handelsblatt* that the main issue at the Eisenach and Rüsselsheim plants is to "implement more efficient solutions on site"—a rather transparent euphemism for the destruction of workers' rights and benefits, which are viewed by shareholders as an expensive legacy cost. What are involved are collectively agreed wages and conditions for which generations of workers have fought. These include company pensions, which have been under attack at Opel for a year. Management has long wanted to lower pensions and switch to an employee-funded system.

Automotive expert Ferdinand Dudenhöffer from the Centre for Automotive Research explained to public broadcaster MDR that, in his opinion, the "tough cost optimizer" Stellantis is undoubtedly considering "that Eisenach will no longer be needed in the long term."

At Opel headquarters in Rüsselsheim, Uwe Hochgeschurtz, the new CEO of Opel Automobile Ltd., says he wants to transform the 150-year-old Adam Opel AG into a so-called "green campus."

What is being celebrated as a major technological innovation in the direction of "CO2-neutral driving" is actually the cover for the destruction of the main Opel plant. Hundreds of temporary workers have already been laid off and some 1,000 jobs have been cut through "voluntary" redundancy. Time and again, production is interrupted by short-time work and carried out for months at a time with only one shift. The forge and gear manufacturing facility were closed, which alone cost over 200 jobs.

In Rüsselsheim, management has for years been gradually dismantling the International Technical Development Centre (ITEZ). The merged group now has four development centres—in the US, Paris, Turin and Rüsselsheim. The French development service provider Segula has been based at the German Opel parent plant.

The ITEZ is only "a shadow of itself," say the employees. Over 4,000 of its originally 7,000 highly skilled workers have either been contracted out to Segula, laid off or pressured into signing termination agreements. In July, ITEZ engineers

watched during their vacation as an Opel service company, SGR products, sold off for next to nothing machines and production units from their factories on the Ebay Kleinanzeigen online platform.

When it merged with FCA in January, PSA announced that it would save \$5 billion a year in costs. At that time, Tavares wanted to “concentrate on using synergies and increasing competitiveness from day one.” This is now being implemented step by step.

Jobs are threatened not only in Eisenach and Rüsselsheim, but also in Kaiserslautern, where up to now engines for diesel and gasoline have been built. The approximately 1,400 Opel jobs there are anything but secure.

A new battery cell plant is to be built there, but it is by no means certain that experienced Opel workers will find work. Stellantis has already founded a joint company with Total-Energies, named Automotive Cells Company (ACC), to manufacture batteries. Mercedes-Benz is also participating in ACC, which has already gone into operation at two French locations, in Bordeaux and in Nersac.

Stellantis has also announced the construction of a battery plant in Italy and has received subsidy commitments from the Italian government.

John Elkann, heir to the billion-dollar Italian Agnelli dynasty (Fiat, Alfa Romeo, Maserati, Lancia, Abarth), is chairman of the Stellantis Group’s supervisory board. Management also views the cost of production in Italy as too expensive. Next year, the electric version of the Maserati will be relocated from Grugliasco to the main Mirafiori plant (Turin). In the southern Italian city of Melfi two production lines will be merged into a single one, with no indication of how many jobs will be lost.

In Aspern, Austria, near Vienna, engine production has already been ended, wiping out 300 jobs. The transmission plant (350 positions) is still in operation, but, as in Eisenach, production has been halted until the beginning of January 2022 due to short-time work.

Likewise, jobs at Vauxhall’s UK production sites are at risk. The Brexit crisis is an additional threat to jobs at Vauxhall. Due to semiconductor shortages, production lines in both Ellesmere Port (1,000 jobs) and Luton (900 jobs) came to a standstill in September. In addition, parts suppliers at each location have seen thousands of job cuts.

There is only one maxim for all management decisions: profit. In August, in the middle of the coronavirus pandemic, Stellantis reported a net profit of almost €6 billion for the first half of 2021. This makes one thing clear: the attacks on the jobs, health and conditions of employees can be repulsed only through a joint international struggle of all autoworkers against the capitalist profit system.

That requires a socialist perspective and international strategy.

This is precisely what the IG Metall trade union is seeking to prevent. It defends the capitalist system and wants under all

circumstances to prevent a common, worldwide struggle of autoworkers in all locations. Instead, the union demands closer cooperation with Stellantis management and fears losing its privileges and high-paid positions on the works councils and supervisory boards.

Many Opel workers remember how exuberantly the IG Metall officials praised the takeover of Opel by PSA four years ago. Back then, after meeting Tavares in Paris in February 2017, the long-time Opel works council chairman, Wolfgang Schäfer-Klug, celebrated the emergence of the new “European automobile champion with Franco-German roots.” He praised Tavares for having “credibly conveyed in the conversation that he is interested in sustainable development for Opel/Vauxhall as an independent company. We share this interest as employee representatives.”

Since then, the leading IG Metall officials have been working intensively on the “Pace!” restructuring plan, which has laid the groundwork for major attacks on workers over recent years. At Opel alone, more than 5,000 of the 19,000 jobs were cut in less than four years. Even after the Stellantis merger last year, IG Metall and the works council expressly agreed to destroy a further 2,100 jobs.

The defence of jobs can be achieved only in struggle against the corrupt policies of IG Metall and its cooperation with corporate management. To do this, it is necessary for autoworkers to organise themselves independently. In the US, workers in many auto and supplier plants have already set up independent rank-and-file committees to oppose the reactionary policies of the US auto union UAW and its pro-company, multi-tier wage agreements, which have brought a massive deterioration in wages and working conditions.

The International Committee of the Fourth International and its affiliated Socialist Equality Parties called earlier this year for the formation of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees to coordinate and organize the worldwide struggles of all workers. We call on all Opel workers to form rank-and-file committees independent of the trade unions to unite with Stellantis workers and other auto and industrial workers around the world. Make contact with us today to initiate this fight.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact