

Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei members call on Opel workers in Eisenach to fight together with their colleagues at Stellantis

Gregor Link
2 September 2024

As part of the intervention in the state elections that took place in Thuringia and Saxony on Sunday, a team from the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) spoke to workers at the Opel plant in Eisenach last week. SGP members appealed to the Opel workforce to support the struggle of US auto workers who have begun to fight back against job cuts and poverty wages. At the Warren truck assembly plant in Michigan of the Stellantis Group, which also owns Opel, around 2,500 jobs are to be destroyed and production of pickups shut down.

Last week, workers at the Stellantis supplier Dakkota Integrated Systems in Chicago rejected a sell-out contract for the fourth time in a row, before a contract was forced through on a fifth shotgun vote. The Socialist Equality Party (US) is fighting to establish rank-and-file committees that are independent of the United Auto Workers (UAW) union bureaucracy and the other pro-corporate unions.

In opposition to the UAW, which does not oppose the job-cutting plans of Stellantis and is campaigning for the Democrats in the November presidential election, workers have begun building their own rank-and-file committees and are rallying support for their fight among the global Stellantis workforce. The SGP team explained that a strategy is needed against the global auto companies that defends all jobs and unites workers internationally. In this way it is also possible to oppose the politics of war, social devastation and the systematically fuelled anti-immigrant chauvinism.

Contrary to the nationalist and pro-capitalist election campaign being waged by all the establishment parties in Germany, this socialist perspective fell on receptive ears. Many workers compared their situation with that of their US colleagues and took leaflets to discuss with other colleagues. Several agreed from their own experience that the unions and their representatives are colluding with management and acting against the workers. As several confirmed, the IG Metall union has kept its membership completely in the dark about the dispute in the US.

Yet a joint struggle would create the best conditions for beating back the attacks by Stellantis in Europe. At the main Opel plant in Rüsselsheim in Hesse alone, 1,000 jobs are to be cut this year. At Fiat in Italy, 12,000 redundancies have also been announced—plus the destruction of a further 13,000 jobs in the supplier industry. In July, the Opel plant in Aspern near Vienna, which once employed almost 2,000 people, was closed.

Bastian, who did his apprenticeship at the plant and has worked at Opel for almost 25 years, first wanted to ensure that the SGP members were not union representatives, as they are “corrupt to the bone” and “get the cushy jobs,” he said. When asked about the job cuts and the working conditions that the US workers are fighting against, he said, “That’s the Stellantis philosophy: save, save, save. I’ve worked in almost all areas, in the body shop, the paint shop, even in Rüsselsheim and the UK. It’s no different everywhere.”

He reported that “Today, barely 300 workers come out of the plant for a shift. There are no more than 1,000 of the core workforce here, although there were more than 2,000 when I started. The older core workforce is hoping to retire somehow before the plant closes and possibly receive a severance payment. Many activities were outsourced and the cheapest and worst of five suppliers or service providers was chosen. As a result, the quality is no longer the real thing. We are working our butts off for management’s mistakes.”

Like other auto companies, Stellantis systematically uses temporary labour agencies to hire migrant workers from various countries under particularly poor conditions, thereby increasing exploitation in the company as a whole. The plant in Eisenach employed workers from many different temporary labour agencies, including the three largest companies Randstad, Adecco and Manpower. Many workers spoke only Polish, French or some English.

Bastian commented: “Management says, ‘The workforce needs to be rejuvenated.’ But the new recruits will never get

the same pay grade. They just don't know that yet. They are told that they can get permanent contracts and move up if they work hard. That's a lie. If you can't speak the language and don't know many laws, you can't defend yourself. If you know your rights, you can become rebellious after 20 years." From the company's point of view, this should be systematically prevented, he said.

The Opel plant in Eisenach dates back to the takeover of the formerly state-owned "Automobilwerke Eisenach" by Adam Opel AG in 1990 and the subsequent liquidation of production of the older East German models. In the 1990s, there were three shifts totalling 1,900 workers to produce one million Opel vehicles within seven years, making the plant one of the most successful and productive car plants in Europe. The plant produced the "Adam" model from 2013 to May 2019, when production of the "Corsa" also came to an end.

In 2021, the company threatened to close the plant in order to suspend an agreed wage increase with the agreement of IG Metall. The plant is now producing the Grandland electric SUV, which is selling poorly. As a result, eight days of short-time working were ordered at the beginning of the year. According to *Automobilwoche*, the number of Opel employees in Eisenach has fallen to 1,360.

The economic decline in Eisenach sheds light on the despicable role of the Left Party and the right-wing character of the new party of its former leader Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW). This is epitomised by lead BSW candidate Katja Wolf in the Thuringia state elections, who was mayor of Eisenach from 2012 to 2024 and politically supported the job cuts during this time.

A recent YouTube interview with journalist Tilo Jung shows clearly that Wolf holds reactionary positions on all key issues. After defending the cancellation of the subsidy for school meals, she explained that the level of citizen's allowance welfare payments should not be determined politically, that the minimum wage should be "determined by the collective bargaining partners" and that wage growth "must also be generated." The problems with migration were "so big that it is no longer possible to solve them really well" and society was "overwhelmed and exhausted" because there was no "limitation of migration." In local and state politics, "pragmatic solutions must be found" and, if necessary, motions put forward by the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) must be supported, she said.

She then reported that a car seat manufacturer based in Eisenach had ceased operations after Opel decided to award the contract to "Morocco and Romania" due to lower wages. This logic, which has been used by every capitalist since the days of Adam Opel to justify the intensification of exploitation, "simply has to be recognised," said Wolf.

Statements like these show that the Left Party and the BSW are anti-working class parties that defend the capitalist system and the same German elites that the far-right AfD also promotes. By imposing the harshest cuts and agitating against the most vulnerable, under the guise of "left-wing" or "populist" policies, these parties are not only creating the breeding ground for fascism, but also realising essential parts of the far-right's programme.

Speaking outside the plant, Dietmar Gaisenkersting, SGP deputy chairman, sharply rejected this policy. He explained how "Workers are confronted with the same problems in every country. The unions work closely with the corporations, dividing them into permanent and contract workers, as well as by location and nation. The global attacks on jobs can only be fended off by car workers in all countries if they unite internationally."

The cross-border unification of the working class and a common struggle against exploitation by corporate bosses in every country is not only a humanitarian requirement, but a strategic necessity. Only with such a global, socialist strategy can the working class gain control of a complex world economy that has created unprecedented levels of productivity and wealth but is currently completely subordinated to the corporate oligarchy's drive for profits.

The SGP and the *World Socialist Web Site* therefore call on all workers to get in touch and form rank-and-file action committees in all workplaces to stand up for the following principles and demands:

- Immediate halt to all redundancies and reinstatement of all those affected!
- Shorten the working day and at the same time increase wages to take into account the reduced time required for the production of electric vehicles and to compensate for wages that have been stagnating for decades!
- Unite across all borders in the fight against the global jobs massacre!
- Expropriate the car companies and place them under democratic workers' control!

Send a Whatsapp message to +491633378340 and register using the form below to get in touch with other action committees in the automotive industry and beyond.



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact