

Swedish union bureaucracy uses GM strike to undercut German workers

By Steve James
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Officials of the engineering union Metall at General Motor's Trollhattan plant in Sweden are working to undercut GM workers in Germany by cranking up the exploitation of car workers.

Under its plans to reduce costs in Europe, the car giant is preparing to shed up to 12,000 jobs. GM is locked in battle with rivals Ford, Toyota and Volkswagen, in Europe, North America and the newly expanding market of China—shortly to become the second largest car market in the world. The struggle is being conducted through the companies' ability to drive down wage costs through relocation and increased productivity, while accelerating the global integration of their operations.

Part of GM's European plan is the closure of a major factory, and the integration of several parts of its operation into those remaining. Workers at both Trollhattan and Russelsheim, near Frankfurt, Germany, have been told that one of their plants will close to allow the other to produce both GM's Saab 9-3 and the new Opel Vectra.

GM's operation in Sweden is based on the former Svenska Aeroplan AktieBolaget and one time Swedish national champion, Saab. Since the 1990s takeover of Saab, whose main factory is at Trollhattan, near Gothenburg, GM has worked to integrate Saab production with their other global brands.

GM aims to produce the Saab 9-3 model alongside the Opel Vectra, with which it shares many components, in one major factory in Europe. This will allow production of the two cars to be varied in line with market conditions. Similar moves, along with outsourcing of component production, have transformed every car company into operations that span several continents.

When news of GM's intentions first broke, it was

understood that the local management at Trollhattan and the Opel plant in Russelsheim, Germany, had been instructed to bid against each other to win production of the two cars. Six thousand GM workers jobs are imperiled if GM closes Trollhattan. Up to 20,000 workers in the cluster of component industries around Trollhattan face the same dangers.

In response, the Swedish unions have worked wholeheartedly alongside their local management to present Trollhattan to the GM board as more viable than its rival.

According to *Svenska Dagsbladet*, the Trollhattan management and Metall have come to an agreement under which hourly production will be increased by 50 percent, from 40 to 60 cars, to a higher standard, and at a 20 percent cost saving. The production increase will come through the introduction of a third shift at the plant—allowing 108 hours of uninterrupted production per week. The Trollhattan unions have also agreed to the introduction of temporary and fixed-term production workers and office staff. As compensation for the introduction of night shift and the destruction of employment rights, the union has accepted a minimal increase in shift allowances.

Metall's actions stand in sharp contrast to a pact made, early October, between Swedish car industry unions Metall, Sif and CF, with their German counterparts IG Metall following a meeting in Copenhagen, Denmark.

The Copenhagen Declaration was hailed by Goeran Johnsson, national leader of Metall, as proof that the German and Swedish unions had "well and truly linked arms and promised not to collaborate in any attempt to undercut each other regarding terms and conditions... We agreed not to dump wages or conditions at the other's cost."

Reinhard Kuhlmann of the German IG Metall echoed Johnsson's sentiments.

In truth the Copenhagen Declaration only offers advice to GM management on how to implement job cuts and speed-ups without provoking industrial action. The unions warn that "plant closures, mass redundancies and violation of collective bargaining agreements... will damage GM Europe's public image" and complain that efforts to play workers in one plant against those in another breaks the rules of the "European social model."

Instead, the unions offer GM "transnational union initiatives—not only from Sweden and Germany, but also from Belgium, Poland and Portugal" to "regain competitiveness in a decisive European market."

The unions' only differences with GM are that the impact of GM's drive to profitability in Europe should preferably not involve a major plant closure, but take more manageable forms of redundancy, combined with increased work rates for all GM's European workforce.

The declaration reflects the role of the German and Swedish trade unions as an arm of corporate management. The union bureaucracy's primary concern is to ensure that their position as the instrument of imposing labour discipline is upheld. From this standpoint, the union leaders would much prefer to supervise a continent-wide squeeze on car workers, rather than the more problematic business of pushing through mass sackings and closures in one or two countries. But if this were not accepted, then they would rather preside over plant closures than come into conflict with big business.

Car workers have seen a collapse in jobs and living standards as a result of the readiness of the unions to impose management dictates. In 1986, for example, GM employed 877,000 workers globally for the production of 8,376,000 cars annually. In 2001, the company employed a mere 362,000 workers and made almost as many cars—8,022,000. Saab itself laid off 20 percent of its workforce in 2002, during GM's last major European purge, codenamed Project Olympic.

The unions' sole concern internationally has been to suppress any opposition to the car companies, to isolate workers in individual countries, plants and departments and to propose plants within their own bureaucratic remit as the most easily exploited. October's six-day wildcat strike by GM workers in Bochum created

serious alarm at a possible rebellion by union members. Faced with the possibility of a movement emerging amongst car workers across Europe, Metall therefore ensured that protests amongst car workers in Trollhattan were restricted to two-hour "information meetings".

At the point where Bochum workers were in conflict with the IG Metall bureaucracy over the union's moves to isolate and strangle their dispute, Metall in Sweden took the opportunity to use the German strikes as a selling point for investment in Sweden. The same Metall official, Goeran Johnsson, who trumpeted the Copenhagen agreement, told the press that the "information meetings" would send a message to GM that Swedish workers, in preference to Germans, were more likely to resolve issues without resorting to strikes. "That was the Swedish way to handle it," he said. This would make GM look more kindly on the Swedish factory, when decisions had to be made over plant closures.

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