

No replacement jobs for most workers laid off from Bochum plant in Germany

By Dietmar Henning
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At a factory meeting at the GM-Opel plant in Bochum, Germany on Monday, plant manager Manfred Gellrich informed staff that he was still unable to say anything concrete about the planned closure of the factory. The IG Metall trade union aims to provide details of the job cuts to the 3,300 Opel workers in Bochum only on June 16, even though the plant's closure is to be completed this year.

The district head of IG Metall for the state of North Rhine-Westphalia, Knut Giesler, and Opel's labor director, Ulrich Schumacher, told workers that the final details were still being worked out. This delaying tactic by the unions and management has been going on for months and is part of the company-union conspiracy to wear down the workforce.

At the same time it is increasingly clear that the replacement jobs promised by Opel, the works council and IG Metall exist merely on paper and are likely to provide at best just a few hundred with low-wage jobs, plus a few posts for the company's highly qualified engineers if they are prepared to relocate across Germany.

A key role in the delaying tactics has been played by the Bochum works council and its chairman, Rainer Eienkel. Just before Eienkel was first elected council chairman at the end of 2004, the Opel workers in Bochum went on strike for six days to protest against wage cuts and job losses. The strike took place against the express wishes of the union and the works council. At that time 10,000 workers worked in the Opel Bochum plant.

Since then Eienkel has agreed to concessions year after year, continually arguing that this was the only way to "save the factory and jobs." Just last week, Eienkel once again stressed that he had prevented the plant closure over the past ten years, "because we were

ready to share painful decisions." In fact the Bochum works council leadership has helped facilitate the gradual elimination of most of the plant's workforce. Since 2004 the workforce has been slashed by about 70 percent.

Two years ago, IG Metall put forward the so-called "Germany Plan," which it had worked out together with the Opel joint works council chairman, Wolfgang Schäfer-Klug. The plan contained the union's proposals for comprehensive rationalization measures including job losses, as well as wage and benefit cuts. In response to the demand on the part of the company for the closure of a production facility, IG Metall suggested the Bochum plant.

Pitting one plant against another, the union then organized a vote on a so-called "Main Contract" whereby Opel's other plants were encouraged to vote in favor of the closure proposal. In March 2013 workers at the Bochum factory then voted by a large majority against the main contract and the closure of their own plant. They were subsequently denounced by IG Metall, which actually agreed to move forward the scheduled closure of Bochum from the end of 2016 to 2014.

The response of the works council in Bochum to the union's provocation was to do nothing. Eienkel strongly opposes any form of action and has constantly sought to pacify workers with the prospect of negotiations, which he carries out behind their backs with management. IG Metall initially remained in the background so as not to further inflame the workforce against the union. Eienkel was able to rely on support from the Left Party, which he subsequently joined.

In November 2013, however, Eienkel informed the workforce that IG Metall had once again taken over the negotiations led by its district organizer. The union

later announced that a “social contract agreement” had been negotiated. This turned out to be misleading. In reality, IG Metall and GM-Opel had only agreed to vague “basic points.” Nevertheless, the works council advised workers to wait once again for the results of further negotiations.

The second delaying tactic devised by Einkenkel was a lawsuit against GM-Opel, which he filed a year ago. He claimed that the vote in favor of closures by the Supervisory Board (of which he is a member) in April last year was flawed, in part because the approval of some board members who could not attend the meeting was gained only by phone. The District Court of Darmstadt last week ruled that this procedure was legal. All other outstanding issues are to be reviewed by the court on September 30.

Although the fate of the plant is sealed, Einkenkel is still trying to spread illusions in negotiations with management. Einkenkel said that there are new managers at the helm who are “capable of correcting the mistakes of the past.”

While Einkenkel plays for time, the destruction of workers’ jobs has already been finalized in the boardrooms of the company and IG Metall. For both organizations, the issue is to minimize resistance and implement the redundancies smoothly. Several hundred workers have been found jobs in the Opel factories in Rüsselsheim and Eisenach, and others are to be released into retirement on transitional contracts. Most of the remaining nearly 2,000 workers have to choose between a so-called transfer company or a severance payment. Either they take the severance and are immediately unemployed with little chance of finding other replacement work, or they forgo the severance and become unemployed after two years in the transfer company.

GM-Opel spread rumors through the media of large sums being made available for severance, with some reporting a sum of €550 million. Commentators then wrote cynical denunciations of Opel workers enjoying extravagant severance payments. In fact the cost of the company’s early retirement schemes and the transfer company will be deducted from this sum. The transfer company and its executives will receive a large proportion of the funds to organize the placement of Opel workers into unemployment or low-wage jobs. The closure of the Bochum Opel plant will also lead to

large-scale job losses in supplier companies such as Johnson Controls and Hella.

The 430 existing and promised 265 additional jobs at the Opel goods distribution center in Bochum are also in danger, and the 700 new jobs on the factory site announced by the DHL parcel service will all be low-wage jobs. The DHL plan is primarily a publicity stunt by the “Bochum Perspective 2022” project, founded by the city of Bochum and Opel to sell off or lease the factory. Under the terms of the project the city of Bochum can buy up the premises of more than 1 million square meters for the symbolic price of €1 while at the same time dealing with any contaminated sites. The chairman of the “Bochum Perspective in 2022” is the city’s mayor, Otilie Scholz, a member of the Social Democratic Party (SPD).

Similar deals have been previously struck in the region. The best-known example is the former factory grounds of Thyssen in Oberhausen, which was sold in 1992 to the state of North Rhine-Westphalia and is now a shopping center. In that case, thousands of steelworkers lost their jobs, and the only new jobs created were a few low-paying retail posts.

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