

Germany's Opel Strike: Jobs Are Top Issue

by Rainer Apel

On Oct. 14, something happened that Germany has not seen in many years: The night shift of auto workers at the GM Opel plant in Bochum entered the plant as usual, but halted work, in protest against management's plans to cut 4,000 jobs there, and another 6,000 at other Opel plants in Germany. This sit-in, or "wild-cat" strike, with no orderly strike vote, was not related to wage-bargaining issues as such, but from the start, addressed the GM management's general investment and production strategy. It thereby hit a broader theme that has been addressed in three months of Monday protest rallies in up to 240 German cities: Jobs and production have to be at the top of the political agenda.

GM last Spring announced that 500 million euros of expenses would have to be cut, mostly from labor costs. Now, the company says that 12,000 jobs will be axed in Europe, with 10,000 of these in Germany alone. This came at a time that the German population is beginning to get involved in a more profound discussion about economic reality, with a real unemployment level of 8 million—as high as 20% in the eastern parts of the country. This discussion is a net result of the Monday rallies, which began with the LaRouche movement's first rally in Leipzig, in the eastern state of Saxony, on July 12.

The Monday Rallies

On the surface, the rallies movement appears to be in a big crisis now, because fewer cities are having demonstrations now, and total turnout is less than at the peak in mid-August; but the commitment among protesting citizens to go from mere protests to a substantive debate on economic alternatives, has been deepened since July, with the catalytic role of the LaRouche movement's (especially the youth movement's) direct interventions in the rallies. The impact of the LaRouche movement's Summer political campaign in Germany is seen even in cities where the movement has never been active directly.

For example, the LaRouche movement's leaflets demanding that politicians "tell the truth about real unemployment being at above 8 million" has been picked up by many Monday rally initiatives, and has inspired many members of the rally organizing committees to keep protesting for a real change of governmental policy, away from cost-cutting toward investing. Many people have grasped the idea that the policy must be changed as a whole, to make room for a positive alternative. And, unlike the notorious leftist and other

populist groups, which go for neo-jacobin forms of wild, even violent actions, the average protesting citizen who has provided the basic “manpower” of the Monday rally movement, insists on reasonable, peaceful forms of increasing the pressure on the political establishment.

What the Strike Accomplished

This is also what became visible in the Bochum wild-cat strike: The workers were inside the plant, but would not restart work until the management agreed to discuss a change in policy. There were mass protest rallies in Bochum in support of the strike, with entire families and neighborhoods taking to the streets, as had been typical of most Monday rallies. And, whereas in many, if not most, labor union actions of past years, beer, rock music, and the counterculture were dominant, the huge Bochum rally of Oct. 19, with more than 20,000 Opel workers and other citizens protesting, proceeded in a rather sober way. The Bochum Philharmonic Orchestra even had its brass section perform the pro-labor hymn “For a Common Man,” at the concluding rally. Most of the protesters took a copy of the new leaflet of the LaRouche party, the Civil Rights Movement Solidarity (BüSo), titled “Stop the Economic Destruction in Germany” (see *Documentation*).

The seriousness of the protest in Bochum can also be seen in the personal sacrifice that the strikers made: Not receiving any pay from the labor union, because this was not an authorized strike, each worker lost an average of 100 euros (\$120) per day.

On day 7 of the strike, the Bochum workers voted 6,400 to 1,700 to end their action, out of legal considerations—to prevent strike leaders from being fired—and because the metal-workers union and management had entered talks about alternatives to the originally announced mass layoffs.

But whatever comes out of these talks, will not really be worth the paper it is written on, because whatever management concedes in terms of job guarantees, will be invalidated in this period of deepening economic recession. Therefore, did the Bochum strike achieve anything at all? Its main achievement was a political one: the spillover effect into the rest of Germany, and into other parts of Europe, resembling very much the process of how the idea of the Monday Rally spread from Germany into other European countries.

The Bochum strike, first of all, forced the otherwise reluctant metal-workers union to launch a European-wide day of action at all GM sites in Europe, on Oct. 19, which did a lot to remoralize auto workers in Spain, Britain, Sweden, and Belgium into support for their German colleagues, and prepare them for coming strike actions also in their countries. In Germany, strong protest ferment in the labor-union base of other companies, such as BMW and Volkswagen, also forced the reluctant metal-workers union to issue a common declaration of support for Bochum, on Oct. 18. Delegations of workers from often faraway factories from outside the automobile sector, including from coal mines, came to Bochum on Oct.

19, to take part in the mass protest rally there, and one of these workers, from the main Volkswagen plant in Wolfsburg, 250 kilometers away, was quoted in the press as saying that “all of industry should have a strike like this one, because all of the jobs are on the chopping block.”

Documentation

Zepp-LaRouche: Stop Economic Destruction!

The following leaflet, “Stop Economic Destruction in Germany! Revive the Stability Law of 1967!” was issued by Helga Zepp-LaRouche on Oct. 18. She is the chairwoman of the BüSo (Civil Rights Movement Solidarity).

Far more than 17,000 people are about to lose their very livelihood, at Opel, Karstadt, Spar, Schlecker, and many other firms that are not even mentioned in the media. But this is only the tip of the iceberg. If 4,000 Opel workers in Bochum are laid off, then 40,000 jobs in supplier companies are acutely threatened; the unemployment rate in Bochum, already at 18-20%, will double and assume dimensions like those in many places in eastern Germany. Cities like Bochum or Rüsselsheim are threatened with becoming ghost towns, because who is going to have money for the bakers, the butchers, and the barbers? What does all this talk about “socially acceptable solutions” mean?

The collapse of the globalization house-of-cards which is under way with full force, and which threatens to sweep away the entire German economy, is the inevitable and foreseeable result of the philosophy of the Maastricht Treaty, whose aim, from the very beginning, was to ruin the German economy. The Maastricht Treaty and its “Stability Pact” were the European part of globalization (that is, Anglo-American world empire), which was to subject Europe to the dictates of the banks, and explicitly weaken the German economy through the elimination of the strong German mark. If Germany remains under the dictates of these agreements, then we will plunge further over the economic and social precipice.

Certainly, much can be said about mistakes that were made. Let us remember that the Opel factory in Bochum was built at a time when the coal mines, in accordance with the post-industrial utopia, were being shut down (today we have a huge crisis of coke supplies); Bochum is, in a certain sense, going through its second phase of deindustrialization. Of course, cheap production fanatics in management have discredited Opel and VW; and surely, no German worker can work for two euros an hour payscale, as is normal at the moment in Poland. And clearly, the explosive outsourcing of



Helga Zepp-LaRouche (third from right) calls for reviving Germany's 1967 "Stability Law."

production into the new eastern EU countries and China, is dealing a blow to the solar plexus of the German economy. But all these and other mistakes are the results of the ideology of globalization and the dogma of the free-market economy.

Now, this globalization is coming to an end. The global financial system, whose agenda over the past 40 years has been set to the disadvantage of production and to the advantage of speculation, is now hopelessly and unsalvageably bankrupt. The leading financial institutions, banks, and megaspeculators have exhausted all possibilities of making profits from the stock and bond markets. The various financial bubbles—the real estate bubble, especially in the United States and Great Britain; the credit card debt bubble and the debt bubble in general; the gigantic deficits in the U.S. budget and foreign trade; the gigantic derivatives and currency speculation worth \$2 quadrillion (\$2,000,000,000,000,000!) per year—all these bubbles have heightened the risks on the markets; all that is needed is for one of these bubbles to burst, and the financial system will turn into a minefield. And since the stock and bond markets no longer yield big profits, the megaspeculators have thrown themselves into energy and raw materials markets, since they could care less what effect an oil price of \$55 per barrel might have on the real economy and the social system.

We have now reached the point where governments' continued loyalty to the banks, as occurs, for example with the Stability Pact, is taking its toll on the existence of human beings. Further acceptance of globalization and the Stability Pact represents a violation of natural law, and the duty, anchored in the German Constitution, to serve the common good. Therefore, these agreements must be annulled. We can not allow institutions and industrial capacity, on which the existence of our nation depends, to be shut down and destroyed.

Finance Minister Eichel has officially determined that the overall economic balance has been severely disrupted. With this, there is the immediate possibility to activate the Stability Law of June 8, 1967. This law, which was voted up at the time by the Grand Coalition, in the face of the recession, with about 420,000 unemployed (!), gives the German government ample powers to promote the economic recovery and the labor market—above all, with the help of targeted issues of credit. If we, today, have 20 times as many unemployed, according to the figures of the Econometric Institute in Halle, de facto 8.6 million—and this excludes the most recent wave of layoffs—then it is all the more urgent that this law be activated!

The Federal government *must do this*, and then, following the example of the "New Deal" of Franklin D. Roosevelt, and the model of the Lautenbach Plan and the WTB-Plan of the unionists Woytinsky, Tarnow, and Baade of the 1930s, put *low-interest state credits* at the disposal, for instance, of the Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau [Germany's Reconstruction Finance Agency], not only in order to save the endangered workplaces at Opel and other affected factories, but also to create *full productive employment* through investments in the area of the general welfare. To that end, at least 200 billion euros of additional investments on infrastructure, basic research, and well-defined projects, would be necessary.

For the specific problems of Opel and other automobile concerns, which are certainly not independent of the world market, a partial conversion for the production of other vehicles could be considered; for example, in the public transportation sector (among other things, cable railways, magnetic rail cars) and battery-run automobiles, as well as farm machinery and tractors. If necessary, the affected firms must be transformed into cooperative enterprises, which are supported by savings banks and guaranteed by the government.

On a global level, the only hope for a path out of the present systemic crisis, lies in a victory of Sen. John Kerry in the U.S. elections, and his implementation, with the energetic support of Lyndon LaRouche, of a policy in the tradition of FDR and the "New Deal," in the interest of those 80% of the population who are hit by the depression, and who have become increasingly poor over the past years. In Germany, the BüSo represents the same policy: a New Deal for Europe.

Even though the fateful decision regarding our future will be made in Washington, this does not mean that we can do nothing here.

The German government must be forced to activate the Stability Law, to save all affected companies, and to start a state investment program right away for the construction of the German economy and infrastructure. The starting points for this are the BüSo's Paris-Berlin-Vienna Productive Triangle program, the Delors Plan, the Tremonti Plan, and the construction of the Eurasian Land-Bridge.

It is a matter of the existence and the future of Germany. Help us to save our nation and the future of our children and grandchildren!