

Report From Germany by Rainer Apel

Without New Concepts, Labor Will Lose

A pragmatic struggle for jobs can't succeed in a collapsing economy. Labor leaders must think big!

In-depth reform must occur very fast in Germany's labor union bureaucracy. A review of the year 2004 shows numerous occasions in which workers with a combative mind could have won in the fight against large-scale job losses and income cuts. There has been widespread labor unrest in 2004, fueled mostly by concern about the government's plans for new rounds of budget cuts in labor, health, and welfare budgets.

This is why the LaRouche movement's idea to hold Monday rallies beginning in mid-July, as a way of fighting against the government plans and against management outsourcing policies, was the right idea at the right time. The LaRouche forces called for creating 8 million new jobs through large Eurasian infrastructure and technology projects, in the context of a reorganized global financial-monetary system.

Initially not very enthusiastic about the rallies, the labor unions soon joined them, but the union bureaucracy was motivated more by the desire to keep control, than by real commitment to fight.

This problem was also visible in other sectors of the economy, where the organization of effective labor resistance could have torpedoed management plans for widespread cost-cutting at the expense of workers' incomes. Especially in the automobile sector, management blackmailed workers with the threat: "Make concessions on the costs, or we will move the jobs abroad." At Daimler-Chrysler and at Siemens, this blackmail worked, because the metal workers

union and the factory councils agreed to make "pragmatic" concessions in return for a "job guarantee" until the end of this decade which is, however, not worth the ink with which it is written. But at Opel, the German subsidiary of General Motors, things developed in a different way: Confronted with the management's threat to eliminate 10,000 jobs to cut company expenses by 500 million euros per year, auto workers at the Opel plant in Bochum decided to stage a warning strike on Oct. 13. The warning strike lasted for seven days without the labor union bureaucracy being able to do much against it, except containing the strike to Bochum, thus preventing the other three Opel production sites at Rüsselsheim, Eisenach, and Kaiserslautern from staging strikes as well.

The development in Bochum led to a nationwide wave of support—not just among other auto workers, but also workers from other industrial branches. The big Bochum protest rally of more than 20,000 workers and supporters, included delegations of workers from many other regions of Germany. And when, mostly for legal reasons, the warning strike was called off after a week, it was meant to be a mandate for the labor bureaucracy to start fighting in the negotiations with the management that began shortly thereafter.

The labor bureaucracy has not done much with this mandate, but preferred to stay on the pragmatic path, implying that their understanding of a "fight" was that "concessions will have to be made anyway, so let us try to keep them a bit smaller." Appar-

ently not faced with too much pressure from the labor side, the management did not feel compelled to stop delivering ultimatums, and when the deal with the labor was signed on Dec. 13, it still envisaged the reduction of Opel's workforce in Germany by almost a third—9,500 jobs, instead of the 10,000 that had been in the original management script. Of the 9,500 jobs that are to be taken out of production, between 6,000 and 7,000 workers at the plants in Bochum, Rüsselsheim, and Kaiserslautern will be transferred to so-called "rescue companies," where they will be employed doing something that will have little to do with car-making, and will take home 95% of their former pay. The difference between that, and only unemployment compensation, will be covered by 140 million euros from the national unemployment administration—that is, the taxpayer. But the workers will also lose all extra benefits that had been added to their standard wages, which really means a 15-20% wage cut.

But unlike the situation at the other three production sites of Opel, the mood of the workforce in Bochum, where the seven-day warning strike took place in mid-October, is still combative. In the Dec. 13 vote of the Bochum labor factory council, 21 voted in favor of the management-labor deal, but 16 voted against it. This shows that almost half of the workforce is deeply discontented, and that potential for a new strike is there.

Spokesmen for the faction opposing the deal said that new strikes or protest actions next year cannot be ruled out. Although the October warning strike did not yield any direct results, the anti-austerity faction of the auto workers says the strike was important for workers in other firms, to show them that it is worth fighting against austerity.