

German Labor Anxiously Awaiting GM's Opel Decision

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FRANKFURT (AP) — German workers and politicians waited anxiously Wednesday for a decision by the board of General Motors Co. on the fate of its Opel unit, with thousands of jobs at stake and national elections less than three weeks away.

The automaker had little to say about the second day of the meeting in Detroit on Wednesday. Zurich-based General Motors Europe offered only that it "does not provide any details for GM board of directors meetings," and would not say if or when any word might come on Opel's fate.

Opel spokesman Frank Klaas said only that there would be an announcement "when there is a decision made."

GM has two bids to choose from. German officials, Opel workers and unions have declared support for an offer from Canadian auto parts maker Magna International Inc. and Russian state-backed bank Sberbank, because they believe Magna would preserve more jobs.

Under the terms of the Magna bid, Magna and Sberbank would get a 55 percent stake in Opel. GM would hold onto a 35 percent stake and Opel workers would get 10 percent.

The other bid is from RHJ International, a Brussels-based investment house, which many in Germany fear could sell the unit back to GM at a later date.

Ruesselsheim-based Adam Opel GmbH, whose brands also include Britain's Vauxhall, was transferred to a government-backed trust just ahead of parent GM's bankruptcy. The trust holds 65 percent of Opel, with GM holding 35 percent.

A person familiar with the GM board meeting said Tuesday the automaker's board wouldn't make any decision until Wednesday. The person spoke anonymously because of the ongoing discussions.

Meanwhile, Rainer Eienenkel, Opel's workers' council president at its Bochum plant, told the radio program Deutschlandradio Kultur that Opel's shaky situation threatened thousands of workers at Opel plants and at many parts manufacturers.

"We want the locations, the factories preserved," Eienenkel said.

Tuesday, the European Employee Forum of General Motors, the European

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Metalworkers' Federation, and other European unions called for a prompt decision, fearful that more delays could put Opel and Vauxhall at further risk.

"What we are now witnessing is GM wasting time and money by once more delaying the final decision with an incomprehensible strategy," the groups said in a statement.

RHJ sweetened its offer last week, agreeing to provide euro300 million in cash compared to euro275 million offered earlier and would expect loan guarantees of euro3.2 billion from the government, down from euro3.8 billion.

Last month GM's board declined to choose between the bids, raising speculation that it might not want to sell the unit at all in order to keep its technologies from falling into competitors' hands and to keep Opel engineers under the GM umbrella.

Opel employs 25,000 people in Germany, about half of GM Europe's total work force, and German politicians are keen to safeguard jobs ahead of national elections Sept. 27.

The German government has provided euro1.5 billion (\$2.2 billion) in bridge loans to Opel and has offered a further euro4.5 billion in credit to support the Magna bid.

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