

Workers at Saab "will need to work like hell" to save the crisis-hit car manufacturer, regardless of who takes over the company. □ □



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As Saab's American owner General Motors languishes in bankruptcy, some 4,000 miles away in southwest Sweden, the long midsummer days bring with them a ray of hope to workers at their Trollhättan plant.

Saab is on the block as GM can no longer afford to keep the Swedish automaker as it looks to restructure its operations and emerge a new, leaner company.

"I feel very confident this will be solved," said Fleming Steen, who works in the procurement and logistics department in Trollhättan.

Executives expect a deal to be struck by the end of June and media reports say Swedish sports carmaker Koenigsegg and US investment company Renco Group are the front runners to buy the company.

In 2008, Saab's global sales fell by 25 percent to 93,000 cars and the company posted losses of 3.0 billion kronor (241 million euros, 341 million dollars at the time) yet despite this, employees like Steen remain positive about the company's future.

"I've been working here since 1978 and I've lived through all the ups and downs of this company. We make good cars and we have a very good brand. We will survive," he said.

Saab workers ready to fight for survival

Written by AFP / The Swedish Wire

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One of those lows came in the late 1980s when the strength of the Swedish krona to the dollar hurt Saab's sales in the United States, its largest export market.

GM first invested in Saab in 1990, acquiring a 50 percent stake in its joint venture with truckmaker Scania. The Detroit giant wanted Saab to add a premium marque to its wide range of brands.

"The first time I heard that GM would take over the company, I thought it was very good news, but I think they have handled Saab very badly," Steen told AFP.

Almost two decades later, Saab workers complain their US parent did not invest enough money into new products and the time is right to find a new owner.

"In this marriage between GM and Saab, it's time for a divorce. It would be the best thing for both parties," said Peter Bäckström, who started as a trainee engineer in Trollhättan in 1984.

A car enthusiast since his youth, Bäckström has been the manager and curator since 1995 of the town's Saab museum, some eight kilometres (five miles) from the plant.

He was part of the team that worked on the last generation of the Saab 9-5, which went on sale in 1997.

Some 12 years later, that model is only just about to be replaced.

"I think that the bureaucracy within General Motors was the main obstacle to getting the right products out onto the market as quickly as possible. We were put down on the priority list, frankly speaking," he explained.

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That view is shared by 62-year-old Börje Rahm, who still works eight hours a day at the plant, five days a week.

"We had a lot of ideas about engines with lower fuel consumption but they got stopped," he said.

His colleague Paul Aakerlund, the local president of IF Metall, the Swedish metal workers union, told AFP that GM was more interested in having the latest technology for its German brand Opel.

Rahm, currently Saab's longest-serving employee after 47 years of service, says the automaker lost some of its identity when GM bought out the rest of it in 2000.

"In the beginning, you had the feeling of being part of a big Saab family, but once GM took over more and more that disappeared. There was a real community spirit when I first started working here," Rahm said.

A father of four, Rahm joined Saab in 1962 as an errand boy at the age of fifteen, before graduating to the assembly line and later the technical development department.

"A lot of things have been much better of course, GM did a lot to improve the factory and improve working conditions," he said.

Rahm is confident the company can be turned around and steered back into profitability.

"Of course," he says with a smile. "I am convinced Saab will live for another 50 years."

Saab employees say the US auto giant made mistakes, but many are more upset with the Swedish government's handling of the sale.

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Stockholm has refused to follow Washington's lead in putting money directly into its auto industry as they fear it could end up in the pockets of GM and Ford, owners of Volvo Cars.

Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt turned the heat up further in late May when he said Saab was in a "difficult and vulnerable position."

"Why say something like that?" asked Bäckström, "It doesn't help anyone. Are they trying to lock down Swedish industry totally so we all end up serving coffee and cleaning houses?"

Union official Åkerlund told AFP that employees were "frustrated" with the comments being made by Sweden's right-wing government.

"They are very well informed about what is happening with the sale process. I do not understand why they are saying such negative things about us. People here are irritated by it," said the Saab veteran of 31 years, who joined as an 18-year-old apprentice.

Åkerlund, who under Swedish labour law also sits on the automaker's supervisory board, did not name who he would like to buy Saab, saying only it should be a "strong and independent" investor.

"There is something in the air that we will fix this," he said.

But Bäckström warned that new ownership would not be enough to secure the company's future.

"One thing is for sure," he said. "We are guaranteed a lot of hard work. We will need to work like hell."