IAM attempts union certification among 87 workers at Nissan auto plant in Tennessee

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The National Labor Relations Board is currently deliberating on whether or not to sanction the efforts by the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM) to unionize 87 tool and die maintenance workers at Japanese-owned automaker Nissan's manufacturing facility in Smyrna, Tennessee. The attempt to unionize a "micro-unit" at the factory, which employs about 4,300 workers, follows two previously failed union votes by the United Auto Workers union (UAW) at the plant since its opening in 1983.

The IAM unionization effort at Nissan Smyrna takes place as significant sections of the political establishment—from Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, to the Biden administration, to right-wing Republicans such as Florida Senator Marco Rubio—along with the corporate media are going all out to promote a union drive at Amazon's Bessemer, Alabama, fulfillment center. Fearful of the emerging social opposition among workers and the potential for a rebellion from below, the ruling class is making aggressive and unprecedented efforts to prop up the trade unions, recognizing the role that the unions play in ensuring "labor peace" and containing workers' struggles.

The record of previous union drives by the UAW and IAM in the South in recent decades holds important lessons for workers at both Nissan and Amazon.

In 1989, and again in 2001, workers at the Smyrna factory overwhelmingly rejected the overtures of the UAW despite significant issues inside the plant, including rising injury rates and a lack of benefits. Other attempts in the 1990s were abandoned by the union due to a lack of support. The UAW also suffered a major defeat at Nissan's plant in Canton, Mississippi, in 2017.

Similar to the current tactic of the IAM to "organize" just a small section of workers at Smyrna, the UAW previously attempted union certification among 160 skilled trades maintenance workers at the Volkswagen plant in Chattanooga, Tennessee, winning a vote in 2015, following its defeat in a plant-wide vote in 2014. However, VW challenged the outcome on legal grounds, stating the union must cover all workers in the plant, and the UAW dropped its defense of the case before the NLRB. It was then rebuffed by workers at the Chattanooga factory a second time in 2019, again losing a plant-wide vote.

In each case, autoworkers saw little need to bring in and pay dues to an organization which has developed increasingly intimate and corrupt relations with the Detroit Three auto companies, with the UAW overseeing an accelerating decline in autoworkers' living standards, the closure of dozens of plants, and the destruction of hundreds of thousands of jobs over the last 40 years. At the same time, workers at Nissan, a so-called "foreign transplant," may have been rightly disturbed by the anti-Japanese chauvinism relentlessly promoted by the UAW.

The role of the IAM has also been treacherous, most notably imposing painful concessions on workers at heavy equipment manufacturer Caterpillar in 2012 and on Boeing aircraft workers in 2013 and 2014.

The IAM's pro-corporate record has thus similarly hampered its ability to expand its presence in the South. At a major aircraft production plant in North Charleston, South Carolina, then owned by Vought, the IAM won union recognition in 2007. Workers later voted to decertify the union in 2009 after learning that IAM officials cut a sweetheart deal with Boeing, which had purchased the plant in 2008. The deal contained sweeping concessions in exchange for continuing union recognition. The IAM later attempted to access the plant again in 2017 and was soundly rejected.

Nissan is just one of a number of companies to set up manufacturing operations in the US South in order to access the region's lavish tax incentives and abundance of cheap labor. Today the $7.1 billion Smyrna facility

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remains the company's flagship North American operation, with over 6,000 full-time and contracted production and maintenance workers building six different models. The plant has one of the highest outputs in the US, with 640,000 vehicles produced annually. Nissan's North American headquarters is located in nearby Franklin, Tennessee.

In recent years, the company's profits have steadily declined as a result of the growing slump in auto sales up till 2020, which was then exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. This has led the automaker to increase the exploitation of workers at its factories. Last year, Nissan shuttered three of its factories in Barcelona, Spain, upending the lives of some 23,000 workers and provoking bitter strikes, which were ultimately shut down and betrayed by the unions, which sanctioned the closure of the plants.

At the Smyrna factory, workers who spoke with the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* described a regime of brutal work schedules which included forced overtime and what one worker described as "last minute time," that is, workers are given set hours and then at the "last minute" are forced to work beyond their scheduled shift.

"The last minute extra time is daily, and the mandatory overtime had become that way" prior to the ongoing shortage of auto semiconductors, the worker stated. On March 19, Nissan announced that it was idling three of its North American facilities, including the Smyrna factory, due to the semiconductor shortage.

Another worker who has been at the plant for 18 years described regular demands for speedup and resulting injuries, saying, "Up until recently, car systems has been working 10.5 hours a day, six days a week. We've been doing that the whole month of March. They said it was basically due to the week that we lost [from the winter storms], and our fiscal year ends at the end of the month so we had to ramp up production and hours to try and meet their targets for the year."

"We've had a lot of people starting to get injured. I'm somebody who's being seen about some issues with my elbow. I've never really had an issue with injuries until we started working these long days. I go home every day and ice both of my elbows and my shoulder."

Discussing the number of COVID-19 cases inside the plant, the worker said, "Currently, the last number I saw was maybe 16. It had gotten up to as many as 103. I'm not buying those numbers, I've never bought them." When asked if he thought the cases were actually much higher, he replied, "I do. When it comes to numbers, I don't trust anything about that place."

There are undoubtedly many pressing reasons for workers at Nissan to desire to organize to defend their interests. In 2016, a 46-year-old worker was crushed while repairing machinery at the Smyrna plant. Hypocritically proclaiming concern for the well-being of its employees, Nissan contested even the paltry $29,000 citation levied by the state health and safety agency following its investigation of the death.

While workers need collective organization, the trade unions have demonstrated that they are incapable of any longer defending workers' health and safety, let alone advancing their interests. From the UAW, to the IAM, to the American Federation of Teachers and their counterparts worldwide, the unions have spent decades integrating themselves into the structures of corporate management and the state, and have loyally enforced the reopening of workplaces and schools during the deadly pandemic, placing corporate profits over the lives of workers.

New organizations that are democratically controlled by workers are required. Rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the unions, have been formed by a growing number of autoworkers, teachers and Amazon workers in collaboration with the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party over the past year. These organizations assert that workers' health and interests must take precedence over any consideration of profit, and are working to expand across industries and workplaces, preparing a fight back for the rights of the working class internationally. We encourage Nissan workers interested in forming their own rank-and-file committee to contact us today.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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