

NLRB approves unionization effort at Nissan plant in Smyrna, Tennessee

Zac Thorton
20 June 2021

After months of deliberations, the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) has ruled that a vote to unionize workers will proceed at Japanese automaker Nissan's manufacturing facility in Smyrna, Tennessee. The International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM) is looking to become the sole bargaining representative inside the plant.

The effort at the Smyrna plant is the latest in a long series of attempts by the trade unions to establish a foothold in the South, including the recent debacle of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union's (RWDSU) failed unionization drive among 5,800 workers at Amazon's warehouse in Bessemer, Alabama.

The outcome at Amazon was far from an isolated case. In recent years, unions have suffered a string of major defeats to unionization efforts throughout the region. The UAW was twice rejected by Volkswagen workers at an assembly plant in Chattanooga, Tennessee in 2014 and 2019, the product of the devastating impact which the union's betrayals have had on unionized autoworkers in the Midwest.

As for the IAM, in 2007 it successfully campaigned for union representation at an airplane parts plant in North Charleston, South Carolina, but workers later voted to decertify it after the union signed a sweetheart deal containing sweeping concessions. In 2017, workers at the plant, now owned by Boeing, voted by 74 percent against joining the union.

Originally, the IAM, fearful of a humiliating defeat, had intended to attempt to unionize a "micro unit" of just 87 tool and die maintenance workers. However, in her ruling, NLRB Region 10 acting director Lisa Henderson stipulated that the vote must encompass the entirety of Nissan's full-time workforce, some 4,300 workers. There are indications that the IAM will appeal

the board's decision, but in the meantime, it will not pursue such a vote, a tacit recognition that the union would be unable to garner the required votes.

The lack of support for the IAM inside the plant does not mean that conditions there are tolerable. Indeed, the response of Nissan to years of steadily declining profits as a result of slumps in auto sales, which has been exacerbated by the pandemic, has been to increase its exploitation of its workers. At the Smyrna factory in particular, workers have reported brutal work schedules, with forced overtime and "last minute time," speedup and rising injury rates, and the constant threat of COVID-19, which has run rampant throughout the plant.

The reality is that workers are not convinced that the union would be capable of resolving these issues. Like the corrupt United Auto Workers union, which suffered defeats in unionization votes at Smyrna in 1989 and 2001, the IAM is a pro-company syndicate which has repeatedly run roughshod over the interests of workers at the behest of the corporations.

In 1998, workers for Northwest Airlines, the sixth largest airline prior to its absorption by Delta Airlines, signed recertification cards to replace the IAM with the Airline Mechanics Fraternal Association (AMFA) after the IAM forced through a concessionary agreement which included a paltry wage increase and other offerings to the company at a time when Northwest was flush with profits. The IAM kept workers on the job without a contract for 22 months leading up to the sellout.

A similar scenario played out in 2012 at a hydraulics plant in Joliet, Illinois, owned by heavy equipment manufacturer Caterpillar. The IAM ended a 15-week walkout by 780 workers and rammed through an agreement that included assaults on wages, increased

health care costs, and the replacement of pensions with 401(k) plans. Caterpillar had recently recorded nearly \$2 billion in profits, while its CEO was given \$16.9 million the previous year.

In 2013, the IAM faced a rebellion by rank-and-file workers against its attempts to ram through a concessions contract at Boeing. Workers voted by a 2-to-1 margin to reject an agreement which sanctioned the elimination of pensions, imposed higher health care costs, reduced wage increases, and put in place a “no strike” clause over the life of the agreement until its expiration in 2024. In flagrant opposition to the interests of workers, the union conspired with the company to engineer a second vote on essentially the same agreement which workers had previously rejected.

The unionization effort at Nissan is taking place under conditions of a resurgence of the class struggle around the world, driven by the disaster of the COVID-19 pandemic and intolerable levels of poverty and inequality. However, given the role which the unions have played in defending and upholding such conditions, the growth of these struggles is drawing more workers into struggle against these corrupt organizations.

The way forward for this struggle is the formation of independent rank-and-file committees by workers to oppose the betrayals of the unions. Workers in various industries have taken up this initiative, including among educators and Amazon workers, in addition to autoworkers.

In particular, workers at Nissan should turn to the example being put forward by workers at Volvo’s New River Valley manufacturing facility in Dublin, Virginia. There, the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee (VWRFC) is leading the struggle of 3,000 workers against the isolation of their strike by the UAW. The VWRFC has recently issued a powerful open letter challenging the UAW leadership.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact