

UAW files for union vote at Chattanooga Volkswagen factory

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On March 18, the United Auto Workers announced that a petition had been filed with the National Labor Relations Board asking for a union recognition election at Volkswagen's Chattanooga, Tennessee, plant. The factory—the German automaker's North American electric vehicle hub—employs 5,500 workers who build the ID.4 electric SUV, as well as the Atlas and Atlas Cross Sport gas-engine SUVs.

The UAW said a “super-majority” of the 4,000 eligible workers at the plant signed cards supporting the union, but declined requests by the media to reveal the exact percentage. The union had previously stated it would petition for a vote once 70 percent of workers had signed cards.

The NLRB has reportedly scheduled a unionization vote at the factory on April 17-19, with the results made public on the evening of Friday, April 19.

This will be the first unionization vote at a nonunion auto factory since the UAW launched its widely publicized organizing campaign last fall. UAW officials say they launched the campaign in response to an outpouring of interest following its so-called “stand-up strikes” at the Big Three last year. The Big Three strikes have been widely—and falsely—hailed in the media and by the political establishment as resulting in “historic” contracts for workers at Ford, General Motors and Stellantis.

The desire by workers in the South to unionize undoubtedly reflects real dissatisfaction with oppressive conditions. Southern workers, including autoworkers, face some of the lowest wages and most brutal work regimes in the US. The UAW has repeatedly cited VW workers' descriptions of numerous workplace abuses at the Chattanooga plant.

At the same time, nonunion autoworkers face the same basic problems as those confronting UAW workers at the Big Three: wages not keeping up with inflation, job insecurity, inadequate or nonexistent retirement benefits, punishing work schedules that leave little time for family life, high rates of injury, management harassment and widespread use of lower-paid temporary and contract workers.

While workers want and need collective organizations to fight against low wages and poor working conditions, the reality is that the UAW has long been controlled by a vast bureaucratic apparatus which operates in the interests of corporate management and the government. The UAW bureaucracy wields control over more than \$1 billion in assets and workers' dues money, funding upper-middle-class lifestyles for a small army of functionaries, with nearly 500 officials making six-figure salaries at the UAW's headquarters alone.

For decades, this bureaucracy has suppressed the resistance of the working class to the decimation of workers' jobs and living standards.

To oppose the oppressive conditions they face, VW workers require organizational structures under their democratic control, regardless of whether the UAW is voted in. The *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees call for the formation of rank-and-file factory and workplace committees to organize resistance to low wages, speed-up and unsafe conditions and form connections between workers across industries and national boundaries.

Biden backs the UAW unionization drive

The endorsement of the UAW's “organizing” drive by Biden, who has spent his entire political career as a shill for corporate America, should give any worker pause about the real motives of the unionization campaign.

In response to the UAW's filing, President Biden quickly issued an endorsement “congratulating” VW workers in Chattanooga, stating, “As one of the world's largest automakers, many Volkswagen plants internationally are unionized. As the most pro-union president in American history, I believe American workers too, should have a voice at work.”

UAW President Shawn Fain and the UAW bureaucracy are closely coordinating their campaign with the Biden administration. Broader sections of the Democratic Party have also sought to promote the UAW. In December, a group of 33 Democratic senators, including Michigan's Debbie Stabenow and Gary Peters, sent a letter to Tesla CEO Elon Musk and other executives at nonunion auto plants asking them not to interfere in the UAW unionization campaign.

No doubt, significant sections of the Democratic Party leadership view the expansion of the UAW in the southern states as vital to their electoral fortunes. Fain in particular has been promoted by the media as a “progressive new face” on the corrupt UAW apparatus, one which can be used to try to bolster the labor bona fides of the increasingly discredited Democratic Party itself.

But more fundamentally, the Biden administration views the UAW apparatus as a linchpin in its foreign and domestic policies.

Biden has focused his presidency ever more explicitly on the war with Russia in Ukraine and preparations for military conflict with China. Biden sees the trade union bureaucracies as critical to suppress the class struggle and dragoon workers into a shooting war against the main capitalist competitors of the US, in the first place, China.

Both Biden and UAW President Shawn Fain have repeatedly pointed to the wartime alliance of the unions with the Roosevelt administration during the Second World War—the so-called “Arsenal of Democracy”—as a model for imposing the type of austerity and labor discipline needed to wage America's war for global conquest today.

Despite widespread opposition from UAW members to Biden's anti-worker policies, including the administration's full support for Israel's genocide in Gaza, Fain and the UAW executive board endorsed Biden's reelection in late January. Fain was a guest at Biden's State of the Union address March 7 and has since functioned as one of the president's chief public spokesmen.

While occasionally paying lip service to “internationalism” and attempting to posture as antiwar, Fain has fundamentally continued the reactionary nationalist policies of his predecessors. The fundamental aim of this corporatist strategy is to subjugate American workers to

corporations in the US under the false claim that they somehow share the same interests.

In a Facebook livestream on January 16 promoting the unionization drive at VW, Fain explicitly sought to base the campaign on an appeal to economic nationalism and reactionary American chauvinism.

Describing the “foreign car companies” as “outside special interest groups,” he said, “If autoworkers had the Big Three standards, they’d be bringing home thousands of dollars more than they are today. Instead of that money getting funneled back to Germany, Japan, Korea, or some other billionaires’ pockets, it would stay in Chattanooga, in Alabama, in South Carolina. It would be invested in local businesses and in local communities with local families.”

The reality of the UAW’s “historic” contracts with the Big Three

While the election of the “reformer” Shawn Fain was touted as a victory for the rank and file, Fain has done the exact opposite of what he promised to get elected. This includes ending decades of labor-management collusion, which led to the loss of more than 1 million UAW members’ jobs and a historic regression in the social position of American autoworkers—once among the highest paid industrial workers in the world.

Many non-union workers were aware of the popular demands raised by the UAW in the initial stage of contract negotiations with the Big Three last summer. But the demands for a 40 percent wage increase; the full restoration of cost-of-living adjustments (COLA), pensions, and retiree healthcare; the abolition of tiers and conversion of all temps to full-time status; a reduction in the workweek with no loss of pay—largely plagiarized from the Autoworkers Rank-and-File Committee Network, a network of militant workers’ organizations—were quickly abandoned by Fain & Co.

The UAW apparatus waged no real fight, calling out only a fraction of the membership in a phony “stand-up” strike that permitted Ford, Stellantis and GM to keep their most profitable plants in full operation. Predictably, the resulting contract provided only a 25 percent total wage increase spread out over almost five years, which leaves workers making less in real terms than they did 20 years ago. An inadequate “cost-of-living formula,” meanwhile, provides only pennies on the dollar for price rises.

Since the UAW signed the contracts with Ford, Stellantis and General Motors, all of the false claims that this represented a “historic” win for workers have been exposed.

The UAW claimed the contract protected jobs and that as a result of the new agreement thousands of temp workers, or supplementals, would be made full-time after nine months. Instead, more than 2,300 temp workers at Stellantis have been permanently terminated in Michigan, Ohio and Indiana. Ford and General Motors are also slashing jobs.

In response, workers at Stellantis have formed the Rank-and-File Committee to Fight Job Cuts and issued an open letter calling for uniting laid-off workers with those still employed to oppose this stab in the back by the UAW and the company.

The UAW’s unionization drive

The present unionization campaign comes in the wake of repeated failed attempts by the UAW to gain a foothold at nonunion auto plants. High profile UAW-backed unionization efforts at the Chattanooga VW plant

failed in 2014 and again in 2019 when workers voted against UAW representation. Workers at the Nissan plant in Canton, Mississippi, voted nearly 2-1 against the UAW in 2017.

The UAW has blamed the previous debacles it suffered at Volkswagen on the opposition of right-wing Republicans. However, the primary reason for the defeats is the anti-worker record of the UAW bureaucracy itself, which has collaborated with management over the past four decades to slash workers’ pay and benefits and eliminate hundreds of thousands of jobs.

UAW statements have claimed that the Chattanooga plant is VW’s only nonunion plant in its global operations. UAW officials no doubt have looked longingly to Germany’s “co-determination” laws as a positive model of labor-management “partnership.” At Volkswagen in particular, collusion between union “representatives” from IG Metall is highly systematized through pro-management “works councils” and designated seats for union officials on the company’s board of supervisors. IG Metall officials are currently collaborating in a historic attack on VW workers’ jobs and conditions in Germany.

A number of comments from workers at nonunion auto plants posted on various Facebook message boards reflect awareness of the UAW’s record of betrayals. Pointing to the UAW corruption scandal and string of sellout contracts, one worker at the Volkswagen Chattanooga plant wrote, “A lot of people don’t have a problem with a union, they have a problem with a UAW union.”

Writing about the unionization campaign at Hyundai, another worker wrote, “I’m pro-union but today’s unions aren’t your daddy’s unions! Trust me! My entire life has been Union, from birth the Union has been a part of my life. I have watched as the Union Leaders have become politicians instead of community leaders. I’ve watched as what’s best for everyone turned to what’s in it for them. Unions are wonderful for the workers when they work for the workers and not for politicians and for their own self interests!”

UAW members at the Detroit Three auto companies, responding on Facebook to the unionization drive, have posted highly critical comments as well. “You get NO VOICE ...” wrote one worker. “For \$88 a month you get to hear your union official tell you that company can run the business the way they want ... It doesn’t matter what the contract says...”

A recently terminated Stellantis supplemental worker told the WSWS, “Fain is all over the place saying workers in the South should join the UAW. But he has not addressed the issues we face here with Stellantis firing supplementary workers who the UAW promised would be converted to full-timers.

“We protested at the union headquarters and the UAW said it had ‘no comment.’ What makes anyone think the UAW would stop the companies in the South from doing the same thing to them? The UAW claims they did not know Stellantis was going to fire us. They knew, they are the ones who agreed to it.”

Democratic Party-aligned pseudo-left groups are playing a leading role in the UAW unionization campaign. This includes the publication *Jacobin*, affiliated with the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and also closely aligned with *Labor Notes*.

For these fake socialist groups, the prospect of thousands of new dues-paying UAW members opens up the possibility of additional lucrative posts in the union apparatus. The Fain administration has elevated members of the Democratic Socialists of America (a faction of the Democratic Party) to leading positions. DSA member Brian Shepherd is heading the unionization drive.

There is nothing socialist or even left-wing about the politics of groups like the DSA and publications like *Jacobin* and *Labor Notes*. They are a critical part of the entire oppressive apparatus of the Democratic Party and the trade unions that have suppressed the struggles of workers for decades and imposed one attack after another.

They are fearful and hostile to the increasing turn by workers to take up the call by the WSWs for the building of rank-and-file committees and a rejection of the nationalist and pro capitalist program of the trade union apparatus and for a socialist orientation. This was expressed in initial form by the response to socialist rank-and-file autoworker Will Lehman, who ran for UAW president in 2022 and won nearly 5,000 votes against the candidates of the UAW apparatus. Lehman called for the abolition of the UAW bureaucracy and for power to be placed in the hands of workers on the shop floor.

Regardless of the outcome of the unionization vote in Chattanooga, VW workers will find they require rank-and-file organizations which are genuinely under their control and capable of waging an uncompromising struggle for their interests.

The WSWs will give workers every assistance in this. Workers interested in forming or joining a rank-and-file committee should contact the WSWs.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact