

Unionization vote underway at Chattanooga, Tennessee Volkswagen plant

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Are you an autoworker at the VW plant in Chattanooga or another Southern auto plant? Fill out the form at the bottom of this article to get more information about joining the growing network of rank-and-file committees in the auto industry.

Workers at the Volkswagen assembly plant in Chattanooga, Tennessee, began voting Wednesday morning on whether to join the United Auto Workers union. Voting is continuing until Friday, with ballot counting starting at 8:00 p.m. and results expected later in the evening.

Around 4,300 full-time and part-time manufacturing workers are eligible to vote at VW's only plant in the United States. The company also uses large numbers of lower paid workers who are employed by temporary agencies, but they are not allowed to vote.

The UAW lost two previous unionization votes at the plant, by 712 to 626 in 2014 and 833 to 776 in 2019. In March, the UAW filed for another National Labor Relations Board election after at least 50 percent of the workers signed cards saying they wanted union representation. Union officials have not made public how many workers signed.

The UAW announced Thursday that 5,000 Mercedes workers in Vance, Alabama, will participate in an NLRB-supervised union election on May 13 – 17.

On the eve of the vote, Tennessee Governor Bill Lee and five other Southern Republican governors issued a threatening letter to workers, warning them that a vote for the union would imperil their jobs. "We are seeing in the fallout of the Detroit Three strike with those automakers rethinking investments and cutting jobs," the governors said in a statement. "Putting businesses in our states in that position is the last thing we want to do."

The Republican governors oppose any efforts of workers to organize, even under the banner of the corporatist, pro-company UAW. They fear the union bureaucracy may not be able to contain a potential revolt by autoworkers across the South, where some 150,000 workers are employed at Asian- and European-owned "transplants."

However, the Biden administration and the Democratic Party have spent decades utilizing the UAW bureaucracy to suppress the class struggle, and they see its installation into auto plants in the South as a preemptive action to forestall a revolt. Biden has openly endorsed the UAW unionization effort, and the corporate media, no friend of workers, has generally adopted a favorable tone in its coverage.

Biden, who has praised UAW President Shawn Fain as a "great

friend and labor leader," has sought to utilize the union bureaucracy to suppress social opposition and line workers up behind US imperialism's war for global conquest, directed in the first place against Russia and China.

Just consider Fain's claim to represent workers and the fact that on April 10 he was Biden's guest at a state dinner for Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, part of a series of events aimed at ratcheting up the US conflict with China. Fain shamelessly dined on aged ribeye steak, alongside such corporate malefactors as JP Morgan CEO Jamie Dimon and billionaire Amazon founder Jeff Bezos.

The exploitation of autoworkers in the Southern auto plants is intense, and there is increasing militancy among the racially diverse and powerful working class in the region.

In his X/Twitter post on the unionization vote, Socialist Equality Party candidate for US vice president Jerry White declared:

Workers want to organize and fight. They understand that collective action is needed to defend themselves. But to fight for their class interests they must organize independently of the pro-company UAW apparatus. Fain & Co. worked with the Biden administration to impose a job-cutting contract on Big 3 autoworkers and then endorsed the reelection of the war-mongering president.

Regardless of which way the vote goes this week, VW workers must build and organize rank-and-file committees to fight job cuts, oversee line speeds and health and safety, and counter-pose the will of shop floor workers to the dictates of management, both corporate-controlled parties and the UAW bureaucracy.

While the UAW apparatus and its supporters tout the support that the unionization drive has received from the German IG Metall trade union and VW Works Council, these forces are not the voice of German workers but the voice of highly paid professional sellouts. The IG Metall bureaucracy is currently overseeing sweeping job cuts at VW's operations in Germany, as well as the closure of the Ford Saarlouis plant and job cuts at Bosch, Continental, ZF and others.

In exchange for these services the Works Councils have been a stepping stone for union officials into positions in management.

This includes former VW Works Council President and leading IG Metall official Bernd Osterloh, who is now personnel director at the VW truck subsidiary Traton, with an annual salary of €2 million (US\$2.1 million).

Apologists for the UAW bureaucracy have gone into overdrive promoting the VW union vote. Harley Shaiken, a labor studies professor at the University of California, Berkeley who is regularly cited in the corporate media, told *Ward's Automotive* that a UAW win at VW would have an impact similar to the historic 1937 GM plant occupations in Flint, Michigan. "It's like the forty-fourth day of the Sit-Down strike," he said.

Hardly. In 1936-1937 workers waged and won a life-and-death battle confronting all the forces that management and the state could hurl against them, including the police, the National Guard and hired thugs from the fascistic Black Legion. Far from waging a fight against VW, the UAW has gone out of its way to assure management that a UAW victory will not impinge on the global automaker's profits or "competitiveness." In a recent Facebook post, UAW Volkswagen Local 42 wrote, "We are one of two VW plants outside of Germany without a union. Volkswagen has a very productive relationship with unionized auto workers that enables the company to remain very competitive."

No doubt backroom talks are already underway on the outlines of a pro-management contract deal. In 2014, as part of a UAW-VW "neutrality agreement," the UAW promised that it would engage in "maintaining and where possible enhancing the cost advantages and other competitive advantages that [Volkswagen] enjoys relative to competitors in the United States and North America." The leaking of the secret agreement was instrumental in the UAW's defeat.

Far from waging an all-out battle against the UAW, management has cooperated in allowing an early union vote. VW spokesman Michael Lowder emailed the following statement to the *Detroit Free Press*: "We respect our workers' right to a democratic process and to determine who should represent their interests. We fully support an NLRB vote so every team member has a chance to vote in privacy on this important decision. Volkswagen is proud of our working environment in Chattanooga that provides some of the best paying jobs in the area."

VW workers should look beyond the press hype and study the actual record of Fain and the UAW leadership in the Big Three contract last fall. The UAW quickly abandoned all the popular demands it had raised, such as full cost-of-living protection, the ending of wage and benefit tiers and the restoration of pensions. Fain called a supposedly innovative "Stand Up" strike, in reality a phony strike, in which all the most profitable auto plants were allowed to run full production, filling management's coffers and undermining worker solidarity.

In the end, the UAW accepted a contract that met none of workers' initial demands. It then rushed through a vote without giving workers enough time to adequately study the contract. Despite this, GM workers almost defeated the contract.

To obtain ratification, the UAW told temporary workers that the contract guaranteed that those with nine months would be promoted to regular, full-time positions. Temp workers soon found out how much they could trust Fain. Within weeks after

ratification of the contract, Stellantis began announcing layoffs, including the summary firing of at least 2,000 dues-paying temp workers before their rollover to full-time. Another 200 temp workers were fired last week, and the jobs bloodbath is accelerating.

At the same time, the union bureaucracy sold out the strike by Mack Trucks workers and was instrumental in preventing walkouts at General Dynamics, Allison Transmission and other plants, which would have disrupted production for both the US and Israeli militaries.

If the UAW prevails in the vote this week, workers will find soon find themselves pitted not just against management but against the UAW apparatus as well. Rank-and-file workers cannot sit back and wait for the UAW to negotiate and ram through a pro-company contract. Instead, they must be on guard against backroom deals with management, demand that the entire contents of the contract be released and adequate time be set aside to study and discuss them before any votes, and rank-and-file control over the entire voting process. Autoworkers in Detroit and other auto centers have had a long and bitter experience with the imposition of pro-company contracts through deception and intimidation.

There is broad support for a common struggle by workers in the South with workers throughout the auto and auto parts industry in the US and internationally. In 2022, Mack Trucks worker Will Lehman won nearly 5,000 votes in the UAW presidential election, despite the efforts by the bureaucracy to disenfranchise hundreds of thousands of UAW members. Lehman called for the international unity of autoworkers to fight the global auto companies, the transfer of decision-making and power from the UAW apparatus to workers on the shop floor, and a socialist program to defend workers against the job massacre coming with the transition to electric vehicles.

Regardless of the outcome of the vote, the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) will assist workers at VW, Mercedes and other Southern plants to unite with autoworkers across the US, Mexico, South America, Europe and Asia. This will be a critical component in developing an industrial and political counter-offensive against both parties of capitalist exploitation, war and dictatorship.

Workers interested in finding out more about rank-and-file committees should fill out the form below.



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