

Voting continues at Mercedes-Benz in Alabama on UAW unionization

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Are you an autoworker at Mercedes-Benz 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 Mercedes-Benz factory in Vance, Alabama, east of Tuscaloosa, are voting this week on representation by the United Auto Workers with balloting scheduled to be completed by Friday and results expected to be announced the same day.

The plant builds luxury SUV models as well as electric vehicles. The plant opened in 1997 and at the time was the first Mercedes-Benz light vehicle facility outside Germany. It was the first foreign-owned auto transplant to open in Alabama and was later followed by Hyundai, Toyota and Honda. Alabama is currently ranked number one in the US in terms of autos built for export.

About 5,200 workers are eligible to vote in the union election, including workers at a nearby Mercedes battery plant in Bibb County. It is the first unionization vote at the plant; the UAW called off a previous organizing attempt in 2014. Mercedes-Benz also operates a van plant in North Charleston, South Carolina where a unionization campaign is reportedly underway.

The vote at Mercedes-Benz follows the vote by workers at the Volkswagen plant in Chattanooga, Tennessee to unionize by a nearly 3-1 margin last month. A UAW unionization campaign is also underway at the Hyundai plant in Montgomery, Alabama.

Apparently in response to the unionization drive, Mercedes-Benz announced last month it was replacing the CEO of its North American operations. The company also raised starting pay at the Vance plant to \$23.50 an hour, about the same as new UAW auto assembly workers make.

The interest in unionization by Southern autoworkers reflects a growing understanding that collective resistance is necessary in the face of economic and work conditions that are increasingly intolerable. Anger has been intensified by the subordination of workers' lives to corporate profit during the ongoing pandemic, and sharp erosion of living standards by inflation.

In social media posts workers cite complaints similar to the

issues confronting workers at the Detroit-based car companies, including the spread of part-time work, wage tiers, overwork, stagnating pay and inferior benefits.

If workers vote to bring in the UAW, however, they will quickly learn what their counterparts at GM, Ford and Chrysler have learned from decades of bitter experience. To defend their jobs, wages and working conditions, they will have to fight not only corporate management and the big business politicians, but the UAW apparatus itself.

Whatever the outcome of the vote this week, workers need to organize on the shop floor, independently of the UAW bureaucracy, to defend their interests. This means building rank-and-file committees to oppose job cuts, fight speed-up and demand safe working conditions.

These committees, democratically run by workers themselves, must fight to transfer power and decision making from the UAW apparatus to the rank and file. Workers must fight for contracts that are far superior to the UAW deals with the Big Three automakers—including real guarantees against job cuts and layoffs due to the transition to electric vehicles and the transfer of all casual workers to full-time employees—and have full control over all contract negotiations and ratification votes. The pace of the assembly line and health and safety must be enforced by rank-and-file committees with the full right to strike over speedup and unsafe conditions.

It is telling that the UAW campaign has received full support from President Biden, a long-time corporate shill. Biden previously hailed the successful unionization vote at VW. He has also praised the recent contract settlement at Daimler Truck in North Carolina and other southern states, which is modeled on the UAW sellout of 150,000 Big Three autoworkers last year.

During the 2023 contract struggle, Fain was in almost daily communication with the White House. Their central concern was how to forestall a full-scale rebellion against the UAW bureaucracy, which had been discredited by decades of collusion with corporate management, bribe taking and corruption.

Prior to the September 2023 contract expiration, the Biden administration helped engineer Fain's installation at UAW president during the first-ever membership vote for top UAW

officers. Terrified by the powerful support won by Will Lehman, a Mack Trucks worker and socialist who called for the abolition of the UAW bureaucracy and the transfer of power to workers on the shop floor, union officials deliberately suppressed voter turnout in a rigged election sanctioned by Biden's Labor Department.

The UAW apparatus has sought to capitalize on the mood of rebellion among Southern autoworkers by falsely presenting the 2023 UAW national contract and phony "stand up strike," really a non-strike, as an "historic" win. In reality, the minimal pay raises did not even keep up with inflation.

The signing of the contract has been followed by mass layoffs and the wholesale firing of temporary workers, who had been misled into voting for the contract based on the promise they would be converted to full time.

As for the UAW claiming to fight for more time with families, workers at the Stellantis Toledo, Ohio Jeep complex are being compelled to work 70-hour weeks to make up lost production. The UAW quietly inserted language in the 2023 contract removing previous limits on forced overtime.

For its part, the Biden administration has sought to incorporate the labor apparatus in the UAW and other unions into its strategy to suppress social opposition at home while it ramps up the American economy for trade war and military confrontation with Iran, Russia and China.

Facing massive opposition to his administration's support for the Israeli genocide in Gaza, Biden has relied on the UAW President Shawn Fain to promote the lie that the Democratic president is a champion of the working class.

In this, Fain has been backed by the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and the *Labor Notes* publication, which have sought to provide a political cover for the Biden administration's pro-war, anti-worker, austerity policies and attacks on democratic rights.

The corporate media has largely boosted the UAW's unionization campaign. The Center for Automotive Research, a corporate-funded think tank, all but endorsed a vote for the UAW in a white paper on the Mercedes-Benz unionization campaign.

In "UAW's Next Frontier: Mercedes-Benz in Alabama," the authors assert that the union had been reformed while claiming, "If Mercedes-Benz Plant Tuscaloosa workers choose UAW representation, they could benefit from the union's resources to enhance job security. Additionally, the wage progression and job security for contract workers and temporary workers may see an improvement."

In contrast to Volkswagen, the management of Mercedes-Benz has taken a more aggressively anti-union stance, including putting out anti-union text messages, emails, flyers and sign boards and holding-in plant meetings. The company has reportedly even brought in an African American minister to canvass against unionization among the large number of black workers employed at the plant.

In a move aimed against unionization, on Monday, Alabama Governor Kay Ivey signed a bill that would revoke economic incentives to companies that voluntarily recognize unions starting next year. In a right-wing rant Ivey declared, "Huntsville ... Tuscaloosa ... they're not Detroit. We want to ensure that Alabama values, not Detroit values, continue to define the future of this great state."

Ivey joined about a half-dozen Republican governors in opposing unionization. The fear is that the UAW may not be able to contain the growing revolt among the some 150,000 autoworkers across the South and a broader movement by super-exploited workers in the region, historically one of the most oppressed and impoverished areas of the US.

The Democratic Biden administration on the other hand views the nationalist and pro-capitalist union bureaucracy as a critical lever for suppressing the struggles of the working class, forestalling a broader revolt. Fain has endorsed "Genocide Joe" Biden for re-election and has taken to wearing a sweatshirt emblazoned with the image of a B-24 bomber. The UAW president repeatedly alludes to the "Arsenal of Democracy," a reference to the UAW's role in securing the "home front" during World War II, including by suppressing strikes.

Opposition is mounting to war and repression, manifest this week by the strike vote by 48,000 academic workers at the University of California, members of the UAW, who are demanding an end to the brutal police assault on student protests against the US-backed genocide in Gaza.

Slick PR and clever packaging by Fain can't paper over the escalating tensions in the US and the enormous class divide that grows wider all the time that is fueling a growing rank-and-file rebellion. War will sharpen these tensions enormously.

To fight capitalist exploitation, Mercedes Benz, VW and other Southern workers must join the growing network of rank-and-file committees in the auto industry and coordinate their struggles across borders under the direction of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. This must be connected to the building of a socialist political leadership in the working class to workers globally against war and dictatorship, and the capitalist system that produces them.

Fill out the form below for more information on the Autoworkers Rank-and-File Committees Network.



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