

UAW loses vote among Alabama Mercedes-Benz workers: The political issues

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The vote by autoworkers at Mercedes-Benz in Alabama, rejecting affiliation to the United Auto Workers by a margin of 56-44 percent, is a debacle for the union bureaucracy.

The defeat, in an election that had a turnout of 90 percent, reflects the fact that the UAW's campaign was an entirely top-down effort, initiated and directed by the apparatus, not a genuine movement from below to challenge corporate power.

Indeed, the key difference between the UAW victory at Volkswagen's plant in Chattanooga, Tennessee, and its defeat at Vance, Alabama, near Tuscaloosa, was that VW welcomed the union campaign, while Mercedes-Benz opposed the union and mounted a campaign of anti-union propaganda.

VW has regarded the UAW as a key partner in the exploitation of autoworkers, on the model of its corporatist relations with IG Metall in Germany, and unions at plants in Brazil, Mexico and elsewhere. The Chattanooga plant was the only non-union plant in its global empire.

Mercedes-Benz, on the other hand, campaigned against the UAW, sending daily text blasts and holding captive audience meetings, at which the company denounced the union as an unwanted third party in the relationship of management to the workforce. This was combined with a strident campaign of anti-union propaganda from Alabama Governor Kate Ivey and other Southern Republican governors (whose efforts failed in Tennessee because of VW's pro-union stance).

The UAW campaign to "organize the South" fell flat on its face at the first serious management opposition it encountered, despite having the backing of the Biden administration and receiving favorable reporting in the corporate-controlled media.

After the announcement of the vote totals, UAW President Shawn Fain went into immediate damage control mode, saying the union would challenge the result, claiming illegal interference by Mercedes management. "This company engaged in egregious, illegal behavior," he said.

But since when have the struggles of the working class been conditional on the good behavior of management? In the 1930s, when the UAW was built, the companies engaged in systematic violence, with the beating and murder of militant workers and the deployment of armed thugs, police and National Guard to attack picket lines and break strikes.

That did not prevent the workers from prevailing, because they saw union organization as essential for waging a class struggle to raise wages, improve working conditions, secure company-paid healthcare and pensions, and win tolerable working conditions. They carried out mass pickets, general strikes and plant occupations in which they seized the factories and directly challenged capitalist property.

By contrast, the UAW's push into the South is not associated with any radical program. The union raised no demands on wages, benefits or other conditions. So workers have no reason to believe that their conditions will be materially improved if they join the union.

This is quite deliberate on the part of Fain & Co. The UAW apparatus, which has installed several members of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) into leading positions, does not want a movement from below. This would undermine its own relationships with the companies and the capitalist political establishment. Fain is working closely with the Biden administration to impose a "wartime economy," forcing workers to pay with their jobs and living standards for the gargantuan cost of war against Russia

in Ukraine, vast new aid to Israel for genocide in Gaza, war with Iran, and the continuing US military buildup against China.

Despite claims of a “historic victory” in the 2023 Detroit Three contract struggle, the UAW’s decades-long pro-management corporatist policy has continued under Fain. He called a phony “stand-up” strike, really a non-strike, that left most workers on the job cranking out profits for management.

The final contract settlement abandoned all of the workers’ key demands, delivering a below-inflation pay increase hailed as a “record contract” by Fain and Joe Biden. Since the ratification of the contract, all three of the Detroit-based auto companies have carried out mass job cuts without any opposition on the UAW’s part. This has included the firing of thousands of temporary workers, who had been falsely promised full-time employment under the new contract.

The conditions enforced by the UAW apparatus at GM, Ford and Stellantis are little better than those at Mercedes-Benz. This includes substandard pay and benefits, wage tiers, the spread of part-time work, forced overtime and lack of safety. In social media posts many workers pointed to the recent wave of job cuts hitting UAW-represented plants and the UAW’s well documented record of corruption. Mercedes-Benz management recently boosted pay to match the paltry, below-inflation raises in the UAW-Big Three agreements.

The interest in unionization in the South, long an extremely oppressed and impoverished area, reflects a growing understanding of the need for collective resistance. But the UAW unionization drive in the South is not an effort to tap into this fighting mood and provide workers with militant leadership and direction. Its aim is to block a genuine fight by entangling workers in a corporatist web of union-management collaboration.

As a result of the pro-corporate policies of the AFL-CIO bureaucracy, most recent union efforts in the South have failed, including two successive votes at the huge Amazon distribution center in Bessemer, Alabama, a few miles from the Mercedes-Benz plant

The growing mood of resistance is leading to an open rebellion against the labor bureaucracy. The sharpest expression of this is the strike vote last week by 48,000 academic workers at the University of California to

oppose police suppression of campus anti-genocide protests.

The explicitly political strike has placed rank-and-file UAW members in a direct confrontation with Fain and the rest of union bureaucracy, which has endorsed Biden—the very same president overseeing Israel’s slaughter of the Palestinians and the violent suppression of student protests in the US.

Immediately after the strike vote, the UAW announced the walkout would be limited to a single campus in the vast statewide system. This has raised the need for rank-and-file workers to enforce their own strike mandate and spread the strike among all UAW members.

Whether or not the UAW is brought into one or another plant, workers confront the same basic issue: the necessity to develop rank-and-file organizations, controlled by the workers themselves and independent of the corporatist apparatus.

During the UAW elections that culminated in Fain’s victory in March 2023, rank-and-file Mack Trucks worker Will Lehman won nearly 5,000 votes, in an election that was marked by systematic voter suppression organized by the apparatus with the support of the Biden administration.

Lehman, a socialist, campaigned on a program of abolishing the entire union apparatus and transferring power to the rank and file. He called for the building of a network of rank-and-file committees, as part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), to link autoworkers in other plants and other industries, in the US and throughout the world.

The vote for Lehman reflected the broad support for a rebellion among workers that is striving to put an end to concessions and break the dictatorial grip of the reactionary union apparatus. It is through such a movement, uniting workers inside and outside of the unions, that a fight can be developed against capitalist exploitation.



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