

Defeat of auto workers at VW plant in Tennessee stuns American labor movement

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The defeat of the United Auto Workers (UAW) in a union representation election at the Volkswagen plant in Chattanooga, Tennessee by a vote of 712 to 626 has stunned the American labor movement. Union supporters were counting on a victory, given that a majority of workers had already signed cards seeking union representation and that VW had signed a neutrality agreement with the union, agreeing to allow the workers to express their will through the government supervised election without interference. The defeat—cheered by the Republican Party, the conservative media, and business—has led to soul searching in the union movement.

The U.S. labor unions were hoping that a victory at Chattanooga's VW plant would begin to drive a union wedge into the South. Unions in the U.S. today represent only 11.3 percent of all workers and only 6.7 percent of private sector workers. Why did the union lose? How could things have gone so wrong?

The South of the United States, of course, with its history of African American slavery until 1865, followed by the Jim Crow system of disfranchisement, segregation, and debt peonage from the 1890s until the 1960s, has remained throughout American history a conservative, mostly non-union, and low-wage region of the country. In the immediate post-World War II period U.S. unions announced a campaign to unionization the South, but soon retreated, because the campaign came into conflict with the Democratic Party's "Solid South," the racist White Man's Party (as it was sometimes called) that then controlled the region. The South became an "open shop" region where the law forbade making union membership a condition of employment.

That's the reason, of course, that both domestic and foreign automakers and other corporations moved so many of their plants to the South. Controlled politically since Richard Nixon's election in 1968 by the Republican Party, dominated culturally by the pervasive influence of Evangelical Christianity, still influenced by long-held racist attitudes, though the South has undergone a significant industrialization since the 1980s, still it remains highly resistant to unionization. The Chattanooga VW election—with VW standing neutral—seemed like such an opportunity to change things. So why the defeat?

There are really two answers: one, the successful strategy of the politicians, and, the other, the failure of the union leadership. While VW the corporation was neutral, the political powers-that-be, namely the Republican Party's Governor Bill Haslam spoke out against the union, while Senator Bob Crocker warned that if the workers voted for the union, the company would shift work elsewhere. The also claimed that a pro-union vote would make Chattanooga and all of Tennessee less attractive to business, resulting in less investment and therefore fewer jobs.

The Union's Failure

Bob King, president of the UAW, aware of the South's broadly held, conservative, anti-union sentiment, adopted a conservative approach toward the southern workers. His organizing strategy also reflected the union's historic approach toward the automakers: collaboration. King did not call

for a struggle against the company to increase the workers' power and to improve their wages and conditions, but rather called for cooperation between company and union. Before the election he announced, "Volkswagen is known globally for its system of cooperation with unions and works councils. The UAW seeks to partner with Volkswagen Group of America and a works council to set a new standard in the U.S. for innovative labor-management relations that benefits the company, the entire work force, shareholders and the community."

Anti-union organizations shrewdly used the UAW's plan for partnership with VW to argue that the corporation and the union were colluding against the workers to put in place works councils and a labor union over the heads of the workers. Big business and big labor together against the little people.

The UAW also had to deal with its reputation, sullied over the last couple of decades, but especially since the economic crisis of 2008, because of its negotiation of two-tier contracts, where new employees received wages one-half of those already working in the plant. As labor journalist Jane Slaughter wrote in Labor Notes in 2003, "The United Auto Workers' new contracts with the Big Three automakers and two top suppliers signal the union's unabashed acceptance of a two-tier system..." The two-tier system not only lowered wages for tens of thousands of new hires, it also tended to divide the workforce, and to provide management with a motive for driving out senior workers and replacing them with cheaper new hires. Why, some workers must have asked, do I need a union for that?

Critics of the UAW leadership have also suggested other weaknesses of the campaign: The failure to build a relationship to the communities in Chattanooga. Unions are strongest when they represent not only the workers in the plant, but the working class communities from which the workers come. There was also failure to adopt the strategy used by almost all unions today of conducting house visits to talk with workers. People talk more candidly in their homes than they do in the workplace under the watchful eye of the supervisor. And there was a failure to speak out against the role of some of VW's management employees in the plant who violated the neutrality agreement. While the corporation was apparently neutral, the union failed to force VW to discipline its anti-union managers and supervisors.

If U.S. labor unions are to succeed in organizing workers in the South, and, for that matter, workers throughout the country, they will have to find a strategy that relies not on an alliance with business, but on solidarity and struggle in the working class.

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