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USA

Auto Workers' Loss at Mercedes-Benz Slows the UAW Organizing Drive, but Won't Stop It

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Mercedes-Benz succeeded in defeating the United Auto Workers (UAW) in an election held in the company's plant in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, but UAW President Shawn Fain sees the defeat as a temporary setback in the union's plan to organize the auto industry in the South.

"We fought the good fight and we're going to continue forward," said Fain. "I believe workers want unions, I believe they want justice, and we're going to continue doing what we can do. Ultimately these workers are going to win."

The vote held from May 13 to 17, was 2,045 for the union and 2,642 against out of 5,075 workers eligible to vote. In fact, in the South which has few unions, where the politicians are fiercely anti-union, and where Mercedes conducted an intense campaign against the UAW, it is not a bad result.

The UAW had been on a roll, having won the first national strike against all three big U.S. auto makers—GM, Stellantis and Ford—and then a successful organizing drive at Volkswagen in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Now they've been slowed, but not stopped.

Alabama Governor Kay Ivy had urged workers to vote against the union. "We may soon face another watershed decision when the U-A-W asks nearly 50,000 Alabamians: Do you want continued opportunity and success the Alabama way? Or do want out-of-state special interests telling Alabama how to do business? For me, the choice is clear."

Federico Kochlowski, who became the president and CEO of Mercedes-Benz U.S. International (MBUSI) on April 30, 2024, led the vicious campaign against the UAW. He oversaw distribution of anti-union videos and mailings and captive-audience meetings where company managers argued workers would be foolish to join the union.

The UAW has filed unfair labor practices charges with the National Labor Relations Board, accusing the company of engaging in coercive statements and coercive rules to prevent workers from exercising their right to a free and open union election. The UAW also accuses Mercedes of laying off and refusing to hire pro-union employees.

The UAW has also filed charges with the German government, alleging that Mercedes violated the country's Act on Corporate Due Diligence Obligations in Supply Chains. The Biden administration also spoke to the German government about the UAW's allegations of union-busting.

While the union lost this one, it is expected to fight on. Harley Shaiken, a labor professor at the University of California, Berkeley, explained that the UAW lost twice at the Volkswagen plant in Tennessee, and that in an earlier loss at VW in 2014, 53% voted against the union. But then this year 73% voted for the union. "I have no doubt they will continue organizing and eventually try for another vote," he said.

One Mercedes worker told Labor Notes, "We'll try to figure out what we did wrong, where we missed the mark," said Robert Lett. "We'll try to figure out how to shore up for the next time. Because there will be another time. We're not just going to shrug and walk away. We know this company. We know the company values their profits more than they value their employees."

The UAW has allocated \$40 million for organizing and is looking to organize other plants in the South as well. The

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union must become larger and stronger if it is to confront the industry as it makes the transition to electric vehicles. The union has organizing drives under way at a Hyundai plant in Montgomery, Alabama and Toyota Motor in Troy, Missouri. Republican governors in the South have united in opposition to the union while President Joe Biden has praised the UAW. Presidential candidate Donald Trump has ridiculed UAW president Shawn Fain calling him stupid while insisting that he loves auto workers and that the UAW had better endorse him or it will disappear. A lot of bluster. But, no matter, Shawn Fain says the UAW will not be deterred.

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