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Riding the wave

Trade unions traditionally have a hard time mobilising in the US. However, recent successes in the automotive industry give cause for hope

Even though 1 May is not a public holiday in the United States and the actual reason for the day is less well known, the organisation of workers around the world remains right and important. To this end, another milestone was achieved in the US. At the end of April, employees at the Volkswagen site in Chattanooga, Tennessee, voted by a large majority in favour of being represented by the United Auto Workers (UAW) union. Although the union had already organised a small operating unit at VW in 2015, it has only now succeeded in doing so for the employees of the entire site. This is a historic success for the UAW, which could have a signalling effect.

But what makes this victory so significant? On the one hand, it is clear that three-quarters of the votes cast were in favour of UAW representation. In total, more than 80 per cent of the 4 300 production workers took part in the election. On the other hand, there have already been two failed organising drives at VW in Tennessee in the past (2011 to 2014 and 2019). Even the mini-success in 2015 did not lead to a collective agreement. The site had long been considered the UAW's best chance of organising a non-American automotive company in the south of the US.

The fact that this did not succeed despite support from the IG-Metall union was not only due to resistance from VW management and politicians or the right-to-work status of the US state. There were also difficulties between VW's German works council, IG-Metall and the UAW. Differing strategic approaches and misunderstandings about the stubborn hostility to unions in the South and US labour law – which, among other things, makes it impossible to form a works council without union organisation – also played a role.

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However, the UAW's victory is particularly significant in its historical and geographical dimension: it was achieved in the de facto

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union-free South. In Tennessee, for example, only six per cent of private-sector workers are union members today. The aforementioned right-to-work legislation is a major contributor to the low level of unionisation. This means that workers do not have to be part of a union to benefit from its services in organised workplaces. As a result, unions have few members and little income.

The economic model of the anti-union South is also closely linked to the history of slavery. Therefore, the former chief economist of the AFL-CIO trade union federation, William 'Bill' Spriggs, was very critical of European companies establishing themselves in the South. He accused them of using their investments to support a political and economic model that exploits African-American workers in particular and fights unionisation with every means at its disposal.

This economic model continues to receive political support today, particularly from Republicans. Six of their governors claimed in a letter published just before the VW plant election that the union campaign was driven by 'misinformation and scare tactics' and warned that unionisation would put jobs at risk. Not only does the letter show contempt and complete ignorance of what union representation is and the role it plays in the democratic process. By speaking of 'Southern states values', the governors are also placing themselves in the direct tradition of exploiting African American workers. Instead of 'free' slave labour, workers today are being fobbed off with low wages. And they are still being denied the opportunity to overturn this system through collective effort.

The governors are also using the bogus argument, often used in the US South, that unions are 'unnecessary middlemen' between management and employees. According to this logic, political representation of the people's interests by elected politicians would also be unnecessary.

An ongoing fight

Despite all this, the UAW managed to win in 2024 — so what is different about today's organising effort compared to previous ones? For one thing, Republican opposition was more moderate, despite the letter quoted. This certainly has to do with the current popularity of unions. Public support for unions in the US is at an all-time high, with nearly seven in 10 Americans holding a favourable view of unions, according to an August 2023 poll. On the other hand, the UAW has acted far more

skilfully, especially behind the scenes, and VW also respected its own neutrality pledge in the run-up to the election.

Additionally, Political support came and continues to come from US President Joe Biden and many Democrats. Speaking after the VW victory, he said that these union successes 'have helped raise wages, and demonstrate once again that the middle-class built America' and that unions help workers achieve greater prosperity.

However, the UAW and its new union leadership – not plagued by corruption scandals – certainly made the most important difference. The union, led by President Shawn Fain, was able to score points in autumn 2023 with record collective agreements at the three major US manufacturers General Motors, Ford and Stellantis. Volkswagen, among others, has raised the wages of its production workers by 11 per cent as part of the agreements with the 'Detroit Three'. Now, the new hourly wage in the highest basic class is $32.40 and the annual salary has risen to just over $67 000.

This puts VW's earnings above the median annual household income in the Chattanooga area, which is $54 500. At General Motors, on the other hand, the post-agreement wage is $36 per hour, or just under $75 000 per year (excluding social benefits and profit sharing).

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In addition to the existing wage differences compared to the north of the US, other factors also played a role in the workers' desire to be unionised in the future. The union was able to make progress with the Daimler employees already organised by the UAW who manufacture trucks and buses: On 26 April, the collective agreement for the 7 300 workers at plants in North Carolina, Georgia and Tennessee expired, and the threat of a strike by the UAW alone persuaded management to make a historic offer. It includes wage increases of 25 per cent over four years and, for the first time, inflation compensation and profit sharing.

It is already clear that the UAW has considerable momentum in its historic organising campaigns at 13 previously non-unionised car manufacturers in the US. The upcoming union election at the Mercedes-Benz SUV plant in Vance, Alabama, is going to be exciting as workers there are complaining about working conditions and management retaliation for union activity. If the UAW is also successful with the 5

200 workers at this site in May, it would certainly be possible to speak of a trend reversal. After VW and Mercedes-Benz, the union is planning to organise other car manufacturers. Nearly 150 000 workers at BMW, Honda, Hyundai, Lucid, Mazda, Nissan, Rivian, Subaru, Tesla, Toyota and Volvo are being approached.

Harold Meyerson, editor of the *American Prospect* and a veteran of the pro-union US left, rightly pointed out that US unions traditionally don't gain new members gradually but in waves of mobilisation. The moment for such a wave seems to have arrived. Or, to put it in Shawn Fain's words: 'Stay ready to stand up and keep winning big.'



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