Volkswagen’s Chattanooga workers reject UAW representation

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The votes are in, and the wait is over. In what can only be characterized as a major setback for organized labor, Volkswagen’s Chattanooga employees have voted to reject union representation by the United Auto Workers union (UAW).

Eighty-nine percent of Volkswagen’s Chattanooga employees participated in the election, which was conducted by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) and took place on February 12-14. With 53 percent of workers voting against UAW representation, the union lost the election by a vote of 712-626. Through a press release issued by Volkswagen, Frank Fischer, CEO and chairman of Volkswagen Chattanooga, announced, “Our employees have not made a decision that they are against a works council. Throughout this process, we found great enthusiasm for the idea of an American-style works council both inside and outside our plant. Our goal continues to be to determine the best method for establishing a works council in accordance with the requirements of U.S. labor law to meet VW America’s production needs and serve our employees’ interests.”

The UAW’s fight to organize the Volkswagen plant followed its failed attempt last fall to win the right to represent the workers by a “card check,” a process that allows union certification without a secret-ballot election when a majority of an employer's workers sign an authorization card and the employer subsequently agrees to recognize the union as the employees’ representative for collective bargaining.

Last fall, the UAW collected a majority “card check,” but after workers filed charges with the NLRB alleging the union used misleading and bullying tactics to gain a majority of the plant worker’s signatures, Volkswagen agreed to hold a traditional secret-ballot election and to sign a neutrality agreement with the UAW. By signing the neutrality agreement, Volkswagen agreed to refrain from speaking against the UAW’s efforts to unionize the plant and to give the union free access to various plant facilities. In exchange, the UAW promised not to defame the company or strike during negotiations over a collective bargaining agreement (in the event the union was voted the plant workers’ collective bargaining representative).

Although Volkswagen agreed to stay silent on the UAW vote, few others followed its lead. Politicians, businesses, and business-friendly organizations for months held meetings and press conferences throughout Tennessee to raise opposition to the UAW’s presence in the Chattanooga plant, meetings that intensified in the days preceding the election.

Without question, the UAW’s loss in Chattanooga is a strong blow to the union, whose membership levels have declined by over 60 percent in 30 years. A win would have marked its first success at organizing a foreign-owned plant since the 1980s. Unions have recently refocused their efforts to expand their membership by implementing new strategies aimed at organizing the South, where many manufacturers have moved their plants because of the region’s strong right-to-work laws and antiunion sentiments. With this loss, the union has yet to organize a foreign-owned auto plant in a southern state.

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