

United States: Auto Workers Union Wins Historic Victory at Volkswagen in Tennessee

Thursday 25 April 2024, by [LA BOTZ Dan](#) (Date first published: 21 April 2024).

The United Auto Workers union won a tremendous victory for labor last week that has the potential to begin to restore the power of unions in America.

Workers at the Volkswagen plant in Chattanooga, Tennessee voted overwhelmingly on April 20 to join the United Auto Workers Union, a historic victory, winning the first union election in that industry in the South since the 1940s. Some 2,628 cast votes in favor and 985 against, that is 73% voted for the union. All together 4,326 were eligible to vote and about 84% did.

Union president Shawn Fain told workers celebrating the victory, “You all have just done the most important thing a working-class person can do, and that is stand up.”

Until now, the South has been a bastion of bosses, of non-union open shops, where workers had no vote and no voice in their workplaces. If this victory leads to others, as it is expected to, it will change completely the balance of forces between the corporations and the working class in America. The South, based on slavery until the late 1860s, and on Jim Crow segregation, disfranchisement, and lynching until the 1960s, has remained the U.S. region with fewest unions, lowest wages, the poorest educational level, the worst public health, and the most backward political attitudes in the country. This UAW win could begin to change all of that.

The UAW failed for decades to organize this plant and other auto plants in the South, despite spending millions of dollars. Why this victory now? Under the leadership of UAW president Shawn Fain, the union carried out last year a 45-day strike against Ford, Stellantis, and General Motors and won a contract in October with large wage increases, an end of tiers, and some union representation in electric vehicle plants. For the first time the UAW struck all three companies at once, using an escalating strike of strategically chosen plants that eventually involved 50,000 workers across the country and forced the corporations to yield. The United States had not seen a union lead a strike of industrial workers like that for decades. Workers in the non-union VW plant, now seeing a leadership willing to fight decided they too should join the union.

Having won that strike, the UAW dedicated \$40 million to organizing industry’s non-union plants and has now won its first victory. Now having won at VW, next month the UAW will attempt to win the vote of the 5,200 workers the Mercedes-Benz plant in Alabama. The strength of the UAW will be essential to defending workers as the industry makes the transition to electric vehicles.

Republican governors in the South took a strong stand against unions in their region. Tennessee governor. Bill Lee and the governors of Texas, South Carolina, Mississippi, Georgia and Alabama signed a joint statement saying that voting for the union could threaten the state’s economy, the workers’ jobs and “the values we live by.” “They proudly call themselves democratic socialists and seem more focused on helping President Biden get reelected than on the autoworker jobs being cut at plants they already represent,” said their statement.

President Joe Biden, on the other hand, became the first president ever to walk on a picket line with striking UAW workers last year. He congratulated the workers, saying, "I was proud to stand alongside auto workers in their successful fight for record contracts, and I am proud to stand with auto workers now as they successfully organize at Volkswagen." The UAW has endorsed Biden for president.

We are at the beginning of what could become a wave of union organizing such as we have not seen since the 1960s. Petitions for union elections rose by 35 percent in 2024 compared with the previous year and some 67 percent of Americans now say they support unions. Unions are now poised to organize the South. A new day may be dawning.

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