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USA

How the UAW lost at Nissan

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In early August the UAW's union recognition campaign at the Nissan plant in Canton, Mississippi ended in a disastrous 63% "no" vote — 10% greater than the loss at Volkswagen in Chattanooga, Tennessee three and a half years earlier.

From the beginning of the decade-long campaign at Nissan the UAW sought community support, stressing that "Workers' Rights = Civil Rights." This was a particularly effective strategy given that 80% of the workers are African American, and Canton is 80% Black. And given the 6,000-strong march held this spring in support of the unionization drive, it seemed like the UAW was headed for victory.

But that was outside the sprawling plant. Inside management took an aggressive anti-union stance, holding captive meetings, blaring anti-union videos in the break rooms, and in the days just before the vote holding mandatory large group meetings and even one-to-one sessions. They explained how the UAW would not represent the interests of employees and other "facts."

In listening to the voices of the Nissan workers, health and safety was a major issue, as it is in most non-union workplaces. Several mentioned Derrick Whiting, 37, who collapsed and died on the plant floor in September 2015. He had gone to the plant's medical facility complaining of chest pains and was sent back to the line.

Anna Wolfe reported in the Clarion Ledger, "Some employees claim Nissan did not respond quickly to the crisis and even kept nearby production lines moving. The company denies these allegations, maintaining that safety at its automotive plant is —significantly better than the national average." <http://www.clarionledger.com/story/...>

Others planning on voting for UAW representation spoke about the need for job security and pensions. A big contradiction in the election, however, was the division among African Americans. At Nissan, the top-tier workforce averages \$26 per hour while second-tier workers make \$18 — but both are much higher than Canton's per capita annual household income of \$15,000. Given these economic disparities the company was effective in discouraging eligible workers from "rocking the boat" and voting for an untested union.

African Americans in Mississippi have few opportunities for relatively higher paying blue-collar jobs. Faced with both an anti-labor government and Nissan, many Black workers feared losing a stable, well-paying job. Meanwhile there was debate in the plant around management's favoritism of whites in promotions and opportunities. But neither the in-plant issues of economic inequality nor the particular history of racism in the region were well understood by the UAW leadership. Had there been a strong in-plant committee capable of taking initiative, these could have been addressed.

Organizing Problems

Of the 6400 workers at the plant, only 3500-3800 were eligible to vote. The rest were temporary workers. In fact 2500 are employed by Kelly Services, not Nissan.

At Nissan there are three separate tiers. There are "legacy" workers who were hired in when Nissan began. Second are "pathway" workers who started as temporaries and gained full-time employment — but whose benefits will never

equal the highest tier. There are approximately 1500 of these second-tier workers. Third are the “temporary” workers employed by Kelly Services.

As a retired autoworker, I see two huge organizing issues: 1) the pro-union workers didn’t come together and begin to act like a union but merely talked about why there should be one. 2) The UAW didn’t reach out to the temporary workers and draw them into the campaign.

Most autoworkers see how temporary workers are superexploited. They work as hard, or harder, than “legacy” workers but are paid significantly less, with no job security and zero benefits.

In watching the organizing drive from a distance, I’ve wondered what could the UAW organizers do to build a militant union at a large Southern plant, given that many of the problems Nissan workers faced were similar to the ones we had in UAW-represented plants.

After all, UAW officials had preached concessions as a way to keep our jobs since the 1980s. They, along with the corporations, sold two-tier wages and benefits to autoworkers, intimidating and slandering those of us who argued against this strategy.

Once imposed, the two-tier structure was rationalized. Unable to organize the foreign-owned transplants who had located in the South in order to keep unions out, the UAW maintained that until the proportion of unionized autoworkers grew, UAW workers were stuck with concessionary bargaining.

That’s a circular argument. We lost our power because the proportion of unionized autoworkers declined with the opening of the nonunionized transplants. Therefore, we were told, UAW workers must survive by taking concessions, waiting for a better day, when we can grow again and regain what we have lost. But through taking concessions, we undercut the reasons why unorganized autoworkers would want to join!

In the last round of Big Three negotiations, UAW President Dennis Williams chose to negotiate with Chrysler first. Many wondered about his choosing the smallest and weakest corporation for negotiation because it would set the pattern for the other two.

When the negotiated contract was announced, it retained the two-tier system and limited the percentage of workers who could climb up the ladder. To the surprise of Solidarity House (the UAW headquarters), Chrysler workers overwhelmingly rejected it. A second and slightly improved contract was approved – but today there are more job and pay categories than ever before.

The current contract expands the use of temporary workers. Yet the industrial union model is built on the concept that whatever one’s job, there is relatively little difference in pay, benefits and working conditions. Yes, skilled workers make more money, but with the same benefits. Permanent differentials erode collectivity on the shop floor, and allow management to promote a culture where workers see themselves as individuals competing against other workers.

A Different Strategy?

What could the UAW have fought for at Nissan to benefit the 2,500 Nissan temporaries? A core of UAW supporters, coming from all three tiers, could have begun to function as a union on the shop floor. They could have raised

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demands around health and safety issues. They could have contested discrimination that occurs when supervisors favor white workers and when one part of the workforce lacks security.

This would have changed the dynamic about what the union is and deepened the understanding and commitment to economic equality on the job. The union is not a foreign body injected into the Nissan plant, it's the workers who have come together collectively to voice their demands and seek their implementation.

Under this model, building the union is the goal. Maybe the shop committee would be so strong it could challenge the racist system of promotion, maybe even force the company to get rid of Kelly Services and start hiring. But whether or not it could accomplish its goals, the union would function as an institution to carry out campaigns that its members decided upon.

It might even turn the tables on management, tracking Nissan's suppliers and helping those workers to organize as a way of increasing the union's power over the company's just-in-time production.

Holding a recognition election would be a secondary goal. Whenever it happened the temporaries, whatever their formal status, should have the right to vote. Two potential contract demands might then be that temporaries become permanent employees and the wall between tiers be dissolved. That would be a union worth fighting for.

I believe an organizing campaign that united the workers around their needs could have won at Nissan " despite the words of the Republican governor who opposed the union, despite all the Nissan ads on local TV and all the intimidating tactics used on the job.

Such a campaign would transform the union, which today is a shell of what the UAW was. Once it did take on management through a variety of actions including delegations during break time, work-to-rule actions and quickie strikes " a strategy, by the way, that's also needed in the already organized UAW plants.

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