

# Tennessee VW workers hold key unionization vote

April 17 2024, by John BIERS

---



Volkswagen's assembly plant in Chattanooga, Tennessee. will be the first to vote in the United Auto Workers (UAW) campaign to organize Southern plants.

Volkswagen employees in Tennessee will begin casting ballots Wednesday in a vote that could make theirs the first foreign carmaker to

unionize in the American South, expanding gains made by organized labor in the auto heartland of Detroit.

Hopes were high among supporters of the United Auto Workers (UAW) in Chattanooga, Tennessee on the eve of the three-day vote, as the revived labor organization takes on its first target after last fall's triumphant strike of Detroit's "Big Three."

"We're really excited," assembly worker Isaac Meadows said as he headed to the plant to hand out flyers ahead of his 2:00 pm shift.

The American South has historically been a dead zone for union drives in the [auto industry](#), including at the 5,500-employee Chattanooga factory, where workers have twice previously voted down UAW representation.

But labor experts say the UAW could be poised for a historic win under the leadership of President Shawn Fain, with workers attracted by the success of the Detroit strikes.

"The time is right," Meadows told AFP in a phone interview. "Pay hasn't kept up with inflation. People are realizing as labor, we have a lot of power."

Fain, who was elected president in March 2023 in the wake of a corruption scandal in the 89-year-old union, engineered the first-ever simultaneous strike of Ford, General Motors and Stellantis last fall.

After a nearly six-week stoppage, the UAW won wage hikes of about 25 percent, among other long-sought gains.

The UAW also won support from Democratic President Joe Biden, who joined a picket line and invited Fain to this year's State of the Union

address.

Propelled by that momentum, the UAW unveiled an ambitious organizing campaign last November aimed at 13 companies with nearly 150,000 workers, including new players such as Tesla and Lucid.

The bulk of the targeted facilities are situated across the American South, where foreign automakers such as Toyota, Honda and BMW have set up shop.

The UAW has petitioned for a vote at a Mercedes-Benz factory in Alabama, but federal officials have yet to schedule the election.



US President Joe Biden with United Auto Workers (UAW) President, Shawn Fain in September 2023 ahead of Biden's visit to UAW picket line.

## **Company stays neutral**

The UAW has long targeted the South, but has been consistently rejected in prior elections where critics have depicted the union as an interloper risking job losses and factory closures.

Tennessee Governor Bill Lee, who has spoken out against the current drive, released a joint letter with other Republican governors denouncing the UAW campaign.

"Unionization would certainly put our states' jobs in jeopardy," said the letter, also signed by the governors of Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, South Carolina and Texas.

"In America, we respect our workforce and we do not need to pay a third party to tell us who can pick up a box or flip a switch," the letter said.

Despite the opposition of Lee and other Tennessee politicians to the VW campaign, the German automaker has itself struck a tone of neutrality—an unusual position in the United States where companies like Amazon and Starbucks have vocally fought labor drives.

VW has defended its practices against some union claims, noting that it announced an 11 percent wage increase last November and arguing that wage hikes over the last decade at the factory have outpaced inflation.

But on the core question of the election, Volkswagen says on its website, "We respect our workers' right to decide the question of union representation."

That statement reflects input from the Volkswagen Works Council in

Germany, which demanded that the company immediately take down earlier anti-union language, said a spokesman of the employee representative group.

The Works Council also released a rousing video featuring President Daniela Cavallo and cheering Wolfsburg colleagues, expressing solidarity from Germany and promising to keep their "fingers crossed" for a victory.

The UAW has also adjusted tactics in the current push, deferring more to local movements instead of employing a top-down approach, said American University Stephen Silvia, author of *The UAW's Southern Gamble*.

Chattanooga is "the best chance the UAW has ever had in organizing a plant in the South," Silvia said in an interview. A UAW win would be "huge," giving the UAW momentum for its other campaigns, he said.

© 2024 AFP

Citation: Tennessee VW workers hold key unionization vote (2024, April 17) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://techxplore.com/news/2024-04-tennessee-vw-workers-key-unionization.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.