

Mercedes in Alabama to learn if they will join US union

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United Auto Workers (UAW) President Shawn Fain, right, celebrates with local organizers at a UAW vote watch party on April 19, 2024 in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

Workers at Mercedes-Benz's Alabama business are expected to learn Friday if they will shift into a union shop, following a contentious

federally-administered election.

Some 5,200 workers at the Mercedes auto manufacturing plant and battery complex near Tuscaloosa, Alabama, have since Monday been voting on whether to join the United Auto Workers.

The outcome could mark a second triumph in the American South for UAW President Shawn Fain, after Volkswagen workers in Tennessee voted decisively to become a [union](#) shop in April.

The win last month was a landmark for the labor group in a region historically hostile to organized labor.

For the Mercedes workers, voting concludes Friday morning with [election results](#) expected to be released by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) in the afternoon.

"We're optimistic," said Robb Lett, a production team member in the Mercedes battery plant who has been part of the union organizing drive.

"We were expecting a lot of pushback" from Mercedes, added Lett, an Alabama native who has been at the plant since 2014.

Labor experts say another UAW win would bolster campaigns of labor organizers at other factories in the South at Honda, Toyota, Hyundai and other automakers, while a loss could slow down the push.

'Union busting'?

Workers who back the union have filed complaints with the NLRB.

They alleged that the company unfairly retaliated against staff over union activity and surveilled workers, among other charges, said the

NLRB which is overseeing the election.

The UAW has also filed a complaint under a new German law on global supply chain practices, charging the company with a "clear human rights violation" over allegedly firing one pro-union worker with cancer and forcing employees to attend meetings in which plant leaders railed against the union.

Mercedes has come under scrutiny over its conduct during the vote and in the period just ahead of it.

Progressive US Senator Bernie Sanders blasted the company on social media platform X, posting a photo of a banner hung at the plant urging workers to vote against the union.

"That's not being 'neutral' as (Mercedes) claims to be. That's union busting," Sanders said. "I say to Mercedes: Stop intimidating your pro-union workers. End your union busting."

The company "fully respects our Team Members' choice whether to unionize," a Mercedes spokeswoman said in an email. "We believe open and direct communication with our Team Members is the best path forward to ensure continued success."

The historic VW vote came after the UAW's strike last fall on Detroit automakers General Motors, Ford and Stellantis.

The strike resulted in large wage hikes and lifted the profile of Fain, who enlisted President Joe Biden to appear with autoworkers on the picket line.

The UAW success with the Detroit companies lent momentum to the drive in Alabama.

"It gave us something tangible to point to," said Lett, who became active in the drive during the COVID-19 period and aftermath, when workers faced long shifts and unpredictable scheduling due to heavy turnover.

"There are real things that have been won," he said.

But UAW's progress has sparked heavy opposition from southern politicians, who argue the union will undermine the region's success in drawing large companies.

On the eve of the VW vote, Alabama Governor Kay Ivey and other Republican governors released a joint letter denouncing the UAW campaign.

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

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