

Q&A: On Equity (And Unions) At Nissan's Miss. Plant

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Back in the early aughts, global automaker Nissan invested some \$2 billion in 4.2 million square-foot vehicle assembly plant in Canton, Mississippi. Since May 27, 2003, the company has been producing as many as 10 different models there, and currently employs 4,350. However, the relationship between Nissan management and plant floor employees haven't always been smooth — recently, workers have sought out union membership, and in the meantime, have formed into a group called the Mississippi Alliance for Fairness at Nissan (MAFFAN), which aims to create an environment in which a fair union vote can occur. More recently, members of the group have been found protesting at the Geneva Auto Show in early March. We got Rev. C.J. Rhodes, pastor at the Mt Helm Baptist Church in Jackson, Miss., to learn more about MAFFAN's hopes for the future of the Canton plant.

Manufacturing.net: Can you give some background into what MAFFAN members say is happening inside the Canton plant?

Rev. C.J. Rhodes: The Nissan plant came to Mississippi about 10 years ago, and given the tax incentives that the state government awarded them, they will probably be here for another 20 years. The Nissan plant has been a blessing in many ways to Mississippi, and in particular, the Jackson metro area, which includes Canton. More recently, there have been a number of reports from workers at the plant, who have talked about discrimination and intimidation, and they have looked for opportunities to have their voices heard, and some of those workers sought out the UAW to help them in making their voices heard.

More importantly, they were able to reach out to community leaders, who were able to hear their stories, and ask of Nissan a couple of things. First of all, we want to ensure that all workers are being treated fairly and equitably, and not to treat our employees here as second-class global citizens. The second thing is to allow for a fair and free election that won't have intimidation and other factors. Give the anti-union folk fair voice, give the pro-union people fair voice. Give them equal time to share their information, and thereafter allow a well-informed community of workers to vote "yea" or "nay" to include a union.

Manufacturing.net: Are there current labor-related issues occurring in the plant right now, that are causing some employees to seek union representation, or is this more of a preventative step, in case something arises later?

Rhodes: As per the workers, who have come to the community for support, the union conversation is a response to various labor-related issues. For instance, there have been a number of workers who have talked about health risks. They're doing

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these very strenuous jobs, and their back goes out. When you're doing the same process, moving the same body parts hundreds of times a day for a long time, things start to tear down. Their doctor may say, "When you go back to Nissan, you need to do something else, because you could do more harm to your body." Nissan will say, "If you don't come back to the exact same position, we'll just fire you."

Others have talked about not knowing what hours they're going to work day-to-day. They'll go in on Monday not knowing what their hours are that day. They may be working two hours, or they may be working twenty. And they're saying, "Look, we just want to know what to expect week-to-week." If parents want to attend a child's basketball or football game, they'll know in advance if they can or can't, or they may be able to negotiate their schedule.

For some time now, Nissan has been bring on Kelly Services temporary workers, which means, of recourse, that they're not guarantee certain benefits of full-time employees. By bringing on these temporary employees, Nissan gets out of two or three people what they would have to pay one full-time hire. What some of the people in the plant are saying, though, is that they were hired on as full-time employees, but may not have opportunities for growth, whereas these temporary employees, if they agree to play by Nissan's rules, eventually get hired on. It's creating some within the plant, because you have people there who have been faithful to Nissan for 10 years. With this kind of temporary worker model, it suggests to those who are hired full-time that their work and their devotion isn't good enough.

The last thing that has become an issue for a number of workers is that they feel a number of decisions made in the plant are contritious. Those who are actually on the assembly line, those who are actually making the cars, think they should be able to add their insights into how to ensure [the plant] makes better, stronger cars. The workers want to be treated like this is a professional job. To date, they felt like the only way to get that done was through a union, because Nissan had been unresponsive to their concerns.

Manufacturing.net: Previous MAFFAN-related news noted accounts from workers regarding anti-union videos being shown during working hours. Can you elaborate on these claims?

Rhodes: There have been a number of tactics, as it were. Some have been showing anti-union videos to employees. The management will say, "Look, this is what will happen to this plant if we get a union." And the basic theme of those videos is that if a union came to the plant at Canton, then the plant will close, like many plants around the nation have closed. There have been some who have worn shirts that demonstrate their disgust regarding unions, such as "Pro-Nissan, Anti-Union." There have been some kind of verbal threats — such as, "If you get involved in this union stuff, you'll lose your job" — and it's created a sense of intimation for workers, who are saying, "We want more of a voice, but we don't want to lose our jobs."

They've been very consistent in demonstrating the anti-union side, which for us in the community, is not a problem *per se*, but it's only one side. The analogy you

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would use is that if we were having a political campaign, and you only heard from one candidate, you really can't have a fair election. A number of workers at the plant have said, "If you're going to show a 15 minute anti-union video, show a 15 minute pro-union video." Don't insult the intelligence of the workers. Let the workers make intelligent decisions and not feel that they have to make decisions in duress, based off the fear that they may personally lose their jobs, or that they be the impetus for a plant closure.

Manufacturing.net: Are the Nissan employees involved in MAFFAN saying these sentiments are coming from management, or fellow plant floor employees?

Rhodes: From what we gather, this is mainly that certain folks that are over the local management are saying to them, "This is what you have to do to snuff this out." The management answers to higher-ups. I think many folks in management are good folk, but they have to do what they have to do to protect their own jobs, as well as protect the plant. There are clearly a number of workers who are not in favor of unions, whether management was engaged or not.

The broader conversation is more about equity and justice and fairness in the plant. If Nissan could do that with a guarantee without unions, I think most employees would say, "Amen." But because many workers have said Nissan has been unresponsive to certain demands, that the pressure from the union kind of moves it along. We're also hearing that the Nissan plant is responding affirmatively, saying, "Okay, let's start making these changes here and there."

I think it could be maybe that Nissan International has a bit of a cultural insensitivity, that they don't understand the history of the South. Mississippi has long been a cheap labor state, and you have a large, under-educated workforce that has historically worked for pennies. And that's why the Nissan jobs have been so good — people went from making minimum wage to anywhere between \$14 and \$25 an hour. I guess for most Nissan folk, they felt like people should be glad to have these kinds of jobs when they didn't before. But given the kind of justice history of Miss, its engrained in a number of our people to say, "Don't treat us as if we're not worthy of the same kind of respect that workers in Japan or Brazil have." I would hope it's just a matter of Nissan's ignorance of the context they're in, which makes them anti-union.

A lot of the workers are saying we have to keep up this momentum, because at some point we'll see a change in Nissan plant policy, and then we'll have a very fair and equitable election. Even if there was an election a month from now, after Nissan allow for pro-union and anti-union campaigning, and the employees said "no" to that, the hope is still that Nissan will enforce policies that treat the workers the way that we believe they should be treated.

Manufacturing.net: What do you hope to see change in the next few years?

Rhodes: I would say a couple of things. One, we are hoping for an equitable, fair

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election as proceeded by fair campaigning by both sides: pro- and anti-union. And once that campaign has occurred, that employees — both full-time and part-time — get a chance to hear the full arguments from both sides, and then there can be a vote. When that vote happens, whatever happens, I think many in the community will be satisfied.

Second, we want to make sure whatever happens with that vote — whether it's for or against the union — that the Nissan employees be treated as a professional class, that they have access to full benefits, ability to negotiate salaries, time and work schedules. Whatever happens with the union, why hope and prayers is that Nissan will honor and dignify all workers for the worth and value they bring to the table.

The third and last thing is that we hope Nissan understands that this particular fight is not a fight against Nissan but a fight for Nissan. Many of us see Nissan vehicles driving up and down our highways and on our streets, and we're glad that Nissan is here. In order for there to be good faith in a community, to prove that Nissan is truly an equitable organization that is doing good in the community, we just hope they can respond amicably and affirmatively to the voices "crying in the wilderness," as it were. We hope they can see that these workers are not against them, but rather partners in the mission of being a successful corporation.

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