

UAW: Let Us Branch Out To Foreign Automakers

Ken Thomas, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The future of the United Auto Workers union is directly tied to its ability to sign up workers at U.S. plants owned by foreign-based car companies, the union's leader said Monday.

In a speech to union members, UAW President Bob King laid out in stark terms the importance of the union's work to organize a plant owned by a Japanese, South Korean or German competitor to the Detroit Three. King said the UAW would decide in three months which company it would target but said the organizing plans were critical to the union's outlook.

"If we don't organize these transnationals, I don't think there's a long-term future for the UAW, I really don't," King said in a speech at the union's legislative conference.

During the past three decades, the UAW has had little success in organizing workers at U.S. factories owned by foreign car makers, which have built plants mostly in southern states which are generally not as union-friendly as the industrial Midwest.

Many of the foreign car companies pay wages comparable to UAW-represented factories owned by Detroit automakers, but the foreign companies have avoided UAW rules that owners say can make plants less efficient.

King said after years of declining membership, the union needed to represent a larger share of workers in the auto industry to strengthen its position at the bargaining table. He said the UAW had picketed about 50 of the largest foreign auto dealerships in the U.S. and planned to increase the number to 300 or 400 dealerships around the country.

King said the union would need to mobilize all of its 1 million active and retired members in the organizing push.

In 2009, when General Motors and Chrysler sought bankruptcy and Ford faced severe financial problems, the union agreed to let the companies pay newly hired workers about \$15 per hour, about half the hourly wage of a longtime UAW worker. It also agreed to scrap the "jobs bank," in which laid-off workers got most of their pay indefinitely for doing nothing.

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