UAW Sees Membership Growth At Kokomo Plants

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KOKOMO, Ind. (AP) — Following a nationwide trend in 2011, United Auto Workers' locals in Kokomo handed out a few more union cards as automakers hired after years of layoffs that severed UAW's membership.

The union's leadership council for Howard County reported to the U.S. Department of Labor that it represented 5,545 workers in 2011.

While about half what it was five years ago, membership picked up at a rate faster than it did nationwide.

UAW's international headquarters said the union grew by about 4,100 members to 380,719, a 1.1 percent increase.

In Kokomo, membership increased by about 5.4 percent.

Federal labor records say the city's largest union, United Auto Workers Local 685, increased by 19 members in 2011. But Local 685 President Rich Boruff estimated the increase to be in the hundreds.

Records indicate the union, which represents workers at Chrysler Group LLC's three transmission plants in Kokomo, had 3,565 members at the end of 2011.

This week, Boruff estimated the union had as many as 4,200 members.

"I think the numbers are wrong," he said. "We brought in people week after week after week."

Chrysler finished 2011 with about 550 more employees in Kokomo than it had a year earlier.

The job growth has been attributed to the company's almost $1.3 billion in investments in the city, as well as sales that increased about 26 percent in 2011. Chrysler reported a $183 million net income for 2011, which was the company's first profit since it emerged from bankruptcy in 2009.

Chrysler's other unions experienced similar growth to that at Local 685.

UAW Local 1302, which represents salaried workers at Chrysler, saw an increase from 229 to 281 members.

"If you go back a few years, we had about 310 members," said Local 1302 President George Maus. "Now, we're running around 280. Since bankruptcy, membership has increased simply because the business has improved."

The Department of Labor did not provide a membership number for UAW Local 1166, which represents employees at Chrysler's Kokomo Casting Plant. Attempts to reach a union official were unsuccessful.

Membership at UAW Local 292, which represents employees at General Motors Components Holdings, increased to 774 from 729.

Throughout the U.S., like in Kokomo, UAW membership ticked up slightly over the past two years after the union collectively lost tens of thousands of people during the past 10 years.

Chrysler, GM and Ford Motor Co. laid off more than half their labor force over the past decade, which pulled members out of unions, as the companies combated the recession and lost market share to foreign competitors, among other issues.

Now, Detroit's once-again profitable automakers will continue to ramp up production at their facilities, meaning they will need to hire workers, analysts believe.

The Center for Automotive Research projected the Big Three automakers would add close to 30,000 jobs between 2010 and 2015.

"We have much more lean, much more productive facilities, so the ones that survived are the best of the best," said Kristin Dziczek, director of the research center's Labor and Industry Group.

Even so, the automakers aren't likely to have nearly as many employees as they had just 10 years ago, she said.

Still, if Chrysler, GM and Ford increased employment to 201,000, as CAR projects, that would be less than half the 408,701 jobs the companies had in 2001.

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