

UAW Tries To Organize Nissan Plant In Mississippi

Jeff Amy, Associated Press

JACKSON, Miss. (AP) — The United Auto Workers may be stepping up efforts to organize workers at Nissan Motor Co.'s auto plant in Mississippi.

Democratic U.S. Rep. Bennie Thompson, of Bolton, is among those scheduled to speak Sunday at a news conference in Canton, home of the 3,300-worker assembly plant. The event is meant to support workers seeking an election to organize a union.

The UAW has tried unsuccessfully in the past to unionize workers at Nissan's plant in Smyrna, Tenn., and at other foreign-owned auto plants in the South. However, Nissan spokesman Dave Reuter said Friday that no union election has been held at the Canton plant since it opened in 2003.

"We don't believe that putting a third party between ourselves and our employees is going to make things better," Reuter said. "We don't believe it's going to improve our employees' work environment or our own prosperity."

A UAW spokeswoman confirmed union officials would attend Sunday's meeting, but said officials authorized to make further comments were in transit to Mississippi Friday.

It's unclear how far the union effort has advanced.

The National Labor Relations Board said Friday no petition has been filed seeking a union vote in Canton. At least 30 percent of non-managers have to sign a petition for the board to set a vote, although unions often aim for higher percentages to try to build momentum.

The UAW, faced with shrinking employment rolls at General Motors, Ford and Chrysler, has repeatedly said it's going to redouble its efforts at non-unionized plants operated by foreign-based firms. In December, top officials of the union said they would not target a single foreign company. However, union leaders discussed Nissan as a target for organizing, a person briefed on union meetings told The Associated Press at the time.

UAW President Bob King has said he's seeking deals with foreign automakers to allow workers to vote on union representation in an atmosphere free from the pressurized tactics that labor and management often use to make their case. But the union has also been training workers to demonstrate at dealerships of non-union automakers.

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King also said in December that the union has reports of civil and human rights violations by Nissan from workers and the community.

Mississippi NAACP President Derrick Johnson, who's supposed to appear Sunday with Thompson and others, voiced similar complaints Friday. He said his organization has gotten complaints of "unfair treatment" and noted that Nissan workers in Canton make less than those in Smyrna. Johnson also said workers don't have enough control over their work schedules and pay more than Nissan workers elsewhere for health benefits.

"We're only here to provide support if workers want to vote on a union," Johnson said. "It's our position that they should be able to do so in a fair, open, democratic process."

Reuter confirmed that wages are lower in Mississippi than elsewhere, but described them as "competitive."

"The wages differ," he said. "We're talking about different labor markets."

Workers in Canton were cut to 32 hour-weeks for parts of 2008 and 2009. Reuter said production schedules are set far in advance, but that at some points, the company has furloughed a shift of workers to cut production.

"There's always a need to have flexibility during crisis periods," he said.

Though Nissan has offered buyouts to some workers in Smyrna at least twice, Reuter said the company has never laid off a worker at its U.S. plants.

Nissan is the No. 6 automaker in the United States, with a 8.1 percent share of the market so far in 2012.

The UAW has operated an office near the Canton plant and tried to build support for unionization, and has courted the NAACP among others during that time. But the efforts have yet to succeed. Reuter said the UAW tried in 2005 and 2007 to build support for a vote in Canton, but couldn't interest enough workers.

The UAW lost a vote in 2008 to organize Johnson Controls, a Nissan supplier in Madison, Miss. The union lost votes in 1989 and 2001 at the Smyrna assembly plant, and Reuter said it made other unsuccessful overtures in Smyrna in the 1990s. Reuter said no union vote has ever been held at Nissan's engine and crankshaft plant in Decherd, Tenn.

In Mississippi, 6.8 percent of workers were represented by unions in 2011, the 11th lowest rate of any state. Nationwide, 13 percent of workers are represented by unions. Many of the state's business leaders, including the Mississippi Manufacturers Association, are openly hostile to organized labor.

Thompson, the lone Democrat in Mississippi's congressional delegation, has a friendlier relationship with unions, though. The UAW has made \$86,000 in campaign

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contributions to Thompson since 1989, making the UAW his third-largest contributor historically, according to the Center for Responsive Politics. Unions overall have given Thompson nearly a quarter of all federal campaign money he's ever raised, more than any other sector, according to the center.

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