

## UAW takes its case against Nissan in Mississippi to a global court



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The United Auto Workers, frustrated with the weakness of U.S. labor laws, has taken its case against Nissan's anti-union behavior at its Canton, MS, plant to a global court.

The UAW has joined with the Geneva-based IndustriALL Global Union federation in appealing to both the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in Paris and the U.S. State Department to mediate and ensure a fair union election at the giant Nissan plant in Canton.

"Nissan is a global company that should abide by the global standards that the United States and other countries have agreed on," said UAW President Bob King in a press release.

"Nissan ... works with unions in every part of the world, yet in the United States it acts very differently," agreed Jyrki Raina, general secretary of IndustriALL in Geneva.

The UAW and IndustriALL Global Union filed a formal request for mediation Monday, April 28. The IndustriALL Global Union represents more than 50 million workers, including those at Nissan and Renault plants.

Nissan is a Japanese company partnered with the French auto company Renault in a Netherlands-incorporated Strategic Alliance. Renault CEO Carlos Ghosn heads both companies. The United States, Japan, France and the Netherlands are OECD members that have endorsed the *Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises*, which call on global companies with operations within their borders to behave ethically.

The OECD can help assure "a just and fair resolution that ensures all Nissan workers can exercise the fundamental right to freedom of association without fear of retaliation or threats of job loss," Raina said.

At the Canton plant, UAW has long held that Nissan is waging an anti-union campaign even though no election has been scheduled. Workers have been called into one-on-one meetings with management where unions are disparaged. Workers have reported many threats that the giant, 5,000-employee-plus plant would shut down if workers voted to join a union. These charges are detailed in a 2013 study of the plant by the Mississippi chapter of the NAACP.

Nissan CEO Ghosn has been a vocal opponent of unionization in past elections at the company's Smyrna, TN, plant.

The UAW's action comes after it dropped its challenge to the National Labor Relations Board to invalidate the failed February 14 union election at the Volkswagen plant in Chattanooga, TN.

In Chattanooga, Gov. Bill Haslam and U.S. Sen. Bob Corker, both Tennessee Republicans, repeatedly lied as to their role in the vicious anti-union campaign that ultimately defeated the UAW in a 712-626 vote. Recently leaked documents have shown that they were part of a backroom blackmail deal to threaten Volkswagen with the loss of \$300 million in government incentives if the plant went union.

Aiding in their campaign was right-wing Washington, DC, political operative Grover Norquist, whose Americans for Tax Reform financed billboards across the city that, among other things, called the UAW "United Obama Workers."

U.S. labor laws are among the weakest in the industrialized world. Corporations drag cases through the courts for years, and the NLRB has few teeth to enforce its rulings.

A casebook study is Nissan-Canton employee Chip Wells, a veteran of both the Iraq and Afghanistan wars and a union supporter. The NLRB ruled recently that Nissan broke the law by retaliating against Wells for his pro-union stand. However, current labor law allowed Nissan to settle the case without admitting guilt, and now Wells must fight for back pay lost due to medical leave necessitated by Nissan's treatment of him.

In early April, the five-member NLRB unanimously called for a federal injunction against Michigan-based Kellogg Co. for its six-month lockout of employees at the company's Memphis, TN, plant after a union contract dispute. The national board's ruling came after its New Orleans regional office found multiple violations against the workers' rights. A May 5 hearing has been scheduled, but Kellogg still maintains its position on the contract dispute is unchanged.



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If and when an election comes to the Nissan plant, workers will need to brace for a virulent anti-union campaign much like what took place in Chattanooga.

Mississippi Gov. Phil Bryant, who earned his right-wing credentials as lieutenant governor decrying the evils of undocumented migrant workers, has said on record that he also doesn't want "unions involved in our businesses or our public sector."

He signed onto law bills restricting workers' rights to peaceful demonstrations, local governments' rights in hiring union workers, and workers' ability to negotiate with companies for a harassment-free union election.

With another "right-to-work" demagogue called Ross Barnett smiling from heaven, Bryant and his friends in the state legislature let the workers at the Nissan plant in Canton know in no uncertain terms that they would fight any unionization effort.

The anti-union bills that Bryant signed into law this past legislative session came straight out of the playbook of the American Legislative Exchange Council and the billionaire Koch brothers, whose agenda is to further entrench what a recent study by Princeton and Northwestern University scholars calls the oligarchy of wealth that has replaced U.S. democracy.

Republicans even got help from Democrats like Mississippi legislators Steve Hale, Bennett Malone, Ed Blackmon and Tommy Reynolds.

Workers indeed must look beyond the Democratic Party if they're going to get justice in this country.

The corruption of U.S. democracy today has been clearly seen in recent U.S. Supreme Court rulings that validate the corporate takeover of the two-party system. Corporate federal lobbying and campaign spending totaled \$7.7 billion in 2011-12, compared to \$237 million by labor unions. Corporate CEOs now earn 354 times the median pay of their workers, compared to 42 times that pay in 1980. It is not coincidental that private sector union membership has declined from roughly 19 percent in 1980 to 6.6 percent today.

Charles and David Koch, by the way, recently saw \$1.3 billion added to their \$100 billion personal piggy bank, making them the fifth and sixth wealthiest people in the world.

While Republicans have long been in the hip pocket of corporate industrialists, many Democrats are in there, too. It was Bill Clinton who pushed through NAFTA, and Barack Obama is bound and determined to win approval of the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement, another boondoggle to aid fat cats and impoverish workers.

A recent international study showed that U.S. citizens lag behind other industrialized nations in economic mobility, and no region of the nation has less economic mobility than the U.S. South. The lack of upward mobility cuts across races. Unfair tax codes and lack of support for public education were among the reasons cited for the failure of the American dream.

Yet no institution did more to create the American middle class -- and the American dream -- than organized labor.