

AT WHAT COST?

WORKERS REPORT CONCERNS ABOUT VOLKSWAGEN'S
NEW MANUFACTURING JOBS IN TENNESSEE



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report, told primarily through firsthand testimony of working people at Volkswagen's Chattanooga, Tennessee, production facility, exposes demanding working conditions and a climate hostile to union organizing. Volkswagen employs more than 3,000 people¹ in Chattanooga and is the company's only production facility that does not have a company-recognized employee representative. Production workers there have been organizing with the UAW for better working conditions and treatment in the plant.

- Workers are concerned that the company prioritizes production demands, while also failing to provide adequate training to meet those demands. The production line's continued operation often takes precedence over other concerns. "They make it such a big deal to not stop the line. The line better not stop," says James Robinson, a team member in the Assembly Department.²
- We heard about health and safety concerns exacerbated by the highly physical nature of the work. Workers have seen many of their co-workers require surgery to treat repetitive motion injuries, including young workers in their early 20s. "I have never worked for a place where I've seen so many people damaged and broken," says Shannon Fossett, a team leader in the Finish Department. "I've never seen so many people that have had to have surgeries and be out just because of the way they're worked."³ Workers report that several of their co-workers return to work after having surgery, only to be placed back in the same specific task that caused them to be injured.
- Workplace shifts alternate between days and nights, which workers report causes a high level of stress and fatigue. The constant schedule shifts perpetuate disrupted sleep cycles, which can lead to additional long- and short-term health issues, such as digestive problems and heart disease,⁴ as well as workplace

safety concerns. "It's hard for anybody's body to adjust. You don't adjust to it," says Craig Jordan, a Skilled Trades Department team member. "I had to go to the doctor to get some medicine to help me stay up at night, and some more medicine to help me go to sleep."⁵

- While Volkswagen employs many decent, well-liked supervisors, workers report experiencing offensive and arbitrary treatment from some supervisors. Employees have been verbally berated and even told to perform such tasks as collecting garbage on their hands and knees.⁶
- Despite Volkswagen's official position of neutrality toward union organizing, pro-union workers face harsh discrimination by front-line managers. At times, supervisors have transferred union supporters to more difficult jobs in the facility and left them there for months.⁷
- Misleading statements by elected officials in Tennessee leading up to a union election in 2014 helped sway support away from the union, workers report. After a group of maintenance workers held a separate election, which has been upheld legally by the National Labor Relations Board, Volkswagen continues to refuse to recognize the workers' union, despite being ordered to do so by the NLRB in August 2016.⁸

Due to widespread issues around production demands, workplace health and safety, inadequate training, exhausting schedules and disrespectful treatment in Volkswagen's Chattanooga facility, this report concludes that Volkswagen immediately should recognize and bargain with the UAW-represented maintenance employees, issue a written statement that it will not retaliate against union supporters, and work with the UAW to address all worker concerns.



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Volkswagen Group is a global automobile manufacturer based in Wolfsburg, Germany. In 2016, it became the best-selling automobile manufacturer in the world, delivering 10.3 million units.⁹ Volkswagen operates 120 production plants in 31 countries.¹⁰ The company employs approximately 610,000 workers globally,¹¹ making it one of the largest employers in the world. Its founding marquee, Volkswagen, began operations in the United States in 1955, and currently employs approximately 6,000 workers in the country.¹² Roughly more than half of those employees work in the company's lone production facility in the United States, located on a 1,400-acre site in Chattanooga, Tennessee.¹³

Since production at the Chattanooga facility began in 2011, workers there have been organizing with the UAW over concerns they have about conditions and treatment in the plant. By January 2014, a majority of workers at the Chattanooga plant had signed authorization cards declaring that they wished to be represented by the UAW. An NLRB election was scheduled for Feb. 12–14, 2014. Just before the election, U.S. politicians in Tennessee and other outside groups made statements inferring that Volkswagen would not receive any future industrial incentives from the state or federal government if a union was elected to represent workers in Chattanooga. The UAW narrowly lost the election.¹⁴ The UAW filed objections to the election based on the unlawful and chilling statements made by local politicians. However, in exchange for VW's promise to recognize the UAW, the UAW withdrew its objections.

On Dec. 3–4, 2015, an election was held for the 160 employees in the Skilled Trades Department, despite arguments made by Volkswagen to the National Labor Relations Board. By a margin of 108–48, Skilled Trades workers voted in favor of the UAW. Later that month and again in January 2016, the UAW requested that Volkswagen comply with U.S. federal labor law and bargain in good faith with the union. Volkswagen since has refused

to comply, and its conduct has been found to constitute an unlawful failure and refusal to recognize and bargain with the union under the National Labor Relations Act.¹⁵

The U.S. facility in Chattanooga is the only Volkswagen plant in the world without a company-recognized employee representative. In 2002, Volkswagen Group signed a global framework agreement with the IndustriALL Global Union agreeing to uphold principles of the International Labor Organization's Core Labor Standards, including freedom of association and bargaining rights for workers.¹⁶

Volkswagen, a company that prides itself as being a champion of co-determination and workers' rights, still refuses to comply with U.S. law, with its own code of conduct that publicly states its commitment to respect human rights, with its Global Framework Agreement, with Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development guidelines and with international labor norms.

This report, authored by the AFL-CIO, is based on interviews conducted with current and former Volkswagen employees from the Chattanooga facility over a weeklong period in February and March 2017. In the report, workers describe a workplace with health and safety concerns, poor treatment from some supervisors and an anti-union campaign designed to ultimately defeat any union organizing among the plant's employees. Finally, the report provides recommendations for how Volkswagen can move forward to remedy these problems and create a safer and more productive workplace in Chattanooga.

MAXIMIZING PRODUCTION AND INADEQUATE TRAINING

Employees of Volkswagen's Chattanooga plant understand their job is to help the company produce as many automobiles as possible. However, workers expressed concern that the company prioritizes the speed at which

workers produce these cars over other concerns. Workers report that team members are encouraged to ensure production lines continue to operate at all costs. “Don’t stop my line. Run it. Don’t stop it,” describes David Gleason, a six-year employee who is currently a team leader in the Assembly Department.¹⁷ “They make it such a big deal to not stop the line. The line better not stop,” adds James Robinson, a team member in the Assembly Department.¹⁸

Employees have attempted to bring this issue to plant management, but feel their requests are ignored. Billy Quigg, who has worked at the Chattanooga plant for five years and is currently a team member in the Assembly Department, notes that, “We’ve actually had a group of people from the door line, I think 12 or 14 people, go to [Human Resources] about the line speed, and nothing was done about it.”¹⁹

Compounding issues related to the speed of the assembly line, team members report that employees receive inadequate training at the facility. “They just try to hurry up and get you on the floor,” says James Robinson. “You are supposed to go through Profi Room* training and do so many reps before you’re left on your own. As soon as you get a slight grip on how to do the process, they just feed you to the wolves.”²⁰

When employees begin work at the Chattanooga plant, they are contracted through a temporary agency called Aerotek. Workers are supposed to transition to full-time, permanent employment with Volkswagen. The amount of time that an employee spends working at Volkswagen through the temporary agency appears to be completely up to the discretion of Volkswagen. Robinson reports that it took two years working for Aerotek before he was hired as a Volkswagen employee, even though it was originally communicated to him that it would take only six months.

“They put them [new hires] through a little orientation.... Everything that we learned in that is set aside once you go to work.... All that is set aside because management wants production. They don’t want your safety, they don’t want you to really worry about whether you’re going to come to work tomorrow, because they’ll get somebody else to fill your spot,” says Frank Stewart, a Skilled Trades team member who has worked at Volkswagen since 2010.²¹

Billy Quigg, an Assembly Department team member who started as an Aerotek worker for two years before being

hired on permanently by Volkswagen, agrees that training at the plant needs to be improved. “I think you get a week in the Profi Room, which is static training, and we work on a line that moves. So it doesn’t really go over real well from the Profi Room to the line,” says Quigg.²²

WORKPLACE INJURIES

Frank Stewart worked in the automotive industry for 24 years before coming to VW, and notes that, “the things they do at Volkswagen were not happening where I worked before. It seems like at this plant, they try to push you to the limit and beyond the edge of it.”²³

Workers say there are many physical injuries in Volkswagen’s Chattanooga plant, and they attribute that to the pressure to meet production demands. Repetitive motion injuries are common within the plant, workers note, and many describe having or hearing about elbow, carpal tunnel, shoulder and wrist surgeries.

“I’ve had to see [a doctor] because the bottom two fingers on my hands would clamp. I’d wake up in the morning and they’d be clamped and I’d have to literally pull them apart. I still get some numbness in the bottom portions of my hands,” describes Eric Delacy, a team member in the Paint Department.²⁴ He states that in his job, he is required to use his hands to clamp down on car parts, exerting a great deal of force for 12 seconds at a time more than 500 times a day.

“We call it the claw. It’s the onset of carpal tunnel. Your hands start clawing up,” explains David Gleason, a team leader in the Assembly Department who has worked at Volkswagen for more than six years.²⁵

Employees understand the physical nature of the work may eventually lead to injury; however, many workers note that injuries occur to younger and younger workers than they have seen elsewhere. “I had one fellow on my line that was in his early 20s that had two carpal tunnel operations, one on each arm, within the first three years,” notes Michael Cantrell, a Paint Department team member and UAW Local 42 president.

“I have never worked for a place where I’ve seen so many people damaged and broken,” says Shannon Fossett, a team leader in the Finish Department. “I’ve never seen so many people that have had to have surgeries and be out just because of the way they’re worked.”²⁶

*The Profi Room is the name of Volkswagen’s training room.

In the Chattanooga facility, job rotation is structured in a way that does not allow enough relief from the most physically taxing jobs. “Jobs are supposed to be rotated so that it doesn’t wear a person out throughout the shift,” says Frank Stewart. “One person will stay on a horrible job the whole shift. They’ll tell them to suck it up, keep going, you’ve got to do better.”²⁷

When Erica Carson, a former employee who was a team leader in the Assembly Department, returned to work from foot surgery, she was placed in a job that required her to jump down repeatedly. “For 10 hours, no rotating, I jumped down until my foot swelled up in my shoe and I couldn’t take the shoe off. I kept asking to be rotated, I kept asking for someone to help me. Nobody would help and the supervisor said if I don’t want to do the work I can go home.” Carson says she stayed and completed her shift, and then had to be physically carried out of the plant by two of her co-workers because she no longer could walk.²⁸

At times, workers who suffer injuries are returned to the same jobs that caused the initial injuries. Steve Cochran describes a co-worker who tore the same rotator cuff twice while working a specific job. Upon returning from medical leave after the second tear, the worker asked to move to a different job, but was told there was no other job in the plant.

“If you can’t do it, then you’ll have to find somewhere else to work, because this is the job we have for you,” Cochran describes as plant management’s response.²⁹ Cochran says this individual ended up resigning from Volkswagen since no other opportunities were given.

ALTERNATING SHIFTS CREATE AN EXHAUSTED WORKFORCE

Volkswagen, like other auto-manufacturing plants, demands that work be performed day and night to keep pace with production needs. In Chattanooga, that means employees alternate between working a day shift one to two weeks and a night shift the next week or two.

The length of these shifts can sometimes extend to 12 hours, depending on the work that needs to be completed. The amount of hours worked, coupled with the alternating schedule, makes it difficult for employees to enjoy any sort of work-life balance.

“It’s hard for anybody’s body to adjust. You don’t adjust to it,” says Craig Jordan, a Skilled Trades Department team member. “I had to go to the doctor to get some medicine to help me stay up at night, and some more medicine to help me go to sleep.”³⁰

Although this has been a longtime practice of Volkswagen, employees still are unable to adjust to it. “People think since you’ve done it for so long that you should be used to it by now, but you never get used to it,” says James Robinson.³¹ Robinson and other Volkswagen employees who describe the negative effects of alternating schedules are not alone in their assessment of the potential health and safety risks this kind of work schedule can produce. According to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, constantly shifting from a day to a night schedule not only leads to greater stress and fatigue among workers, but may lead to such long-term health issues as digestive problems and heart disease.³²

Eric Delacy describes an intake of “probably more caffeine than your body should have”³³ to keep himself awake long enough to adjust to the ever-changing shifts.

Other workers note the impossibility of maintaining a proper sleep cycle. “I can tell you when I wake up at night, it’s usually at 11:45, 1:20, 3:05—break times,” says Billy Quigg. “And I’m trying to get a good night’s sleep that way?”³⁴

“Once I get home, I can’t go right to sleep because I have to wind down or take something to alleviate the pain so that I can go to sleep. It takes its toll on your body,” says Annette Stallion. “Your body never has a chance to really get on a schedule.”

In addition to the effect these schedules have on employees’ bodies, workers relate the problems this causes in their personal lives as well. Annette Stallion has been married 20 years. “My husband’s gotten used to me not being there,” she says.³⁵

“I have a newborn kid,” says Billy Quigg. “I’d love to say that I get to see her all the time, but I don’t.... I didn’t get to see her at all on Monday, because I actually had stuff to do after work that had to be done, and by the time I got home, she was already in bed.”³⁶

Volkswagen is not ignorant of these issues, and has tried to ameliorate the situation by offering employees an exercise class at the end of the shift that would help them stay awake. However, due to the length of time spent on the job, many workers do not feel this is reasonable. “With the 12 hours of work, by the time I got home I had one hour to spend with my family,” said Frank Stewart. “That exercise would have taken 30–45 minutes. So how much time would I have had with my family at that point?”³⁷

OFFENSIVE AND ARBITRARY SUPERVISION

While workers from the Chattanooga plant acknowledge that treatment from supervisors depends greatly on whom your supervisor is, they agree that Volkswagen does not always do a sufficient job of creating a culture of respect between their front-line managers and their team members.

“There is a pervasive mentality over there that you are expendable on that floor or you’re not to be listened to or you’re not to be heard, you’re to be bossed,” says David Wheaton, a team member in the Skilled Trades Department.³⁸

Several workers describe unprofessional and humiliating treatment from supervisors. While cleaning up his work area, James Robinson was waiting for a broom to become available so he could finish sweeping up some debris. When his supervisor asked Robinson why the debris had not yet been cleaned and Robinson explained he was waiting for a broom, the supervisor’s response was “You don’t need a broom, just get down there on your hands and knees and pick it up.”³⁹

One day, Robinson forgot to bring his standard Volkswagen hat to work, something he explains happens to everybody from time to time. When it does, employees simply borrow a company hardhat for the day. However, in Robinson’s case, his supervisor verbally abused him.

Only two weeks later, the same supervisor allowed another employee to work his entire shift without his Volkswagen hat or company hardhat. Robinson took a picture of this worker to show Human Resources the disparate treatment he received from this supervisor. Volkswagen responded by suspending Robinson for

breaking company policy against taking pictures inside the plant. Later that same week, they called Robinson to say he would be terminated for the same incident. According to Robinson, nothing happened to either the supervisor or the other employee.⁴⁰

“You suspended and fired me for violating company policy, but then this guy did the same thing and it’s no big deal?” Robinson remarks. “I wasn’t on final warning or anything like that. I came to work on time every day. Never called off or anything.”⁴¹

Robinson thinks one reason this specific supervisor targeted him was because he is African American. He was one of three black employees in his work area, and all three were always the first to be assigned any additional work that was needed.

“Any extra thing he had to do he would call me and my two friends, the black guys, first,” says Robinson. “The same people every time.”⁴²

Robinson says he and his co-workers went to Human Resources repeatedly to ask them to address this issue, yet often nothing was done. Finally, the company ended up moving the supervisor and Robinson’s black co-workers to different departments.

“I guess the solution was to just move the black people away from him.”⁴³

Through help from the UAW, Robinson was able to get his job at Volkswagen back; however, going through the experience was stressful.

“This is my job,” says Robinson. “I’ve got kids to feed, a wife. So, I just try to block it out. It’s kind of hard. You’re going through this every day.”⁴⁴

Some workers feel hopeless when speaking out about problems they encounter on the job. “They just flat out told me, don’t even worry about putting in for team leader,” says Steve Cochran. “It’s because whenever they do things that make things worse for the department, I tell them. There’s no hope.”⁴⁵

VOLKSWAGEN'S ANTI-UNION ACTIONS

Volkswagen has maintained publicly that their attitude toward union organizing is strictly neutral;⁴⁶ however, a closer look at the actions taken by several front-line supervisors shows that Volkswagen's corporate management is not adequately enforcing neutrality on the shop floor.

"The manager in the paint shop does not want a union. He's let it be known that he does not want a union in his paint shop," says Frank Stewart.⁴⁷

Billy Quigg describes a similar atmosphere. "They openly tell people, 'we don't want the union here. We don't support the union,'" he says. Managers have thrown out union literature inside the plant, and Quigg states that pro-union workers know "there is a little bit of a concerted effort against us."⁴⁸

The strong anti-union sentiment among many managers makes it difficult for pro-union workers inside the plant. Pro-union workers describe being passed by for promotions, noting that any time there is a promotion, "You can pretty much bet that 99% of them never signed a card," says David Gleason.⁴⁹

"They make it hard on people," says Frank Stewart. "They've moved people from good jobs to ones that are not good just because they can. They don't promote the union supporters to team leaders or to other positions where they can have a better job."⁵⁰

Other pro-union workers reported being transferred or reassigned to different and often more difficult jobs within the plant. When it became known that Shannon Fossett supported the union, his supervisor ended up moving him to one of the harder jobs even though he was the oldest employee on that line. Fossett was stuck there for three months.

"I was physically just about broken," says Fossett. "I couldn't feel my hands, from my elbows down to my last two fingers on both hands. They were numb. I could make a fist and my middle finger would stick when I would open my hands. I would have to physically take my finger and pull it back open. I'd wake up in the middle of the night and have to sit on the bed and shake my hands to get the feeling back in them."⁵¹

Eric Delacy had a similar experience. While working in the quality area of the Paint Department, he was the only worker who was public about his support for the union. When four positions in the area, including his, were eliminated, the three other employees were given different jobs in the Paint Department. Eric was sent to a completely different department. "It seems an odd coincidence that the only person who got reassigned was the only outspoken person about the union," Delacy notes.⁵²



Retaliatory practices such as these have made it difficult for workers to publicly support union organizing. Some workers are afraid of being in any way associated with the union.

"I had so many people that would meet me 30 miles away to sign a card because they were so scared," says Michael Cantrell.⁵³

Some workers think Volkswagen's approach to union activity can be explained by the fact the company has hired Littler Mendelson, a law firm well known for helping companies in the United States bust union organizing campaigns. "They have that law firm that prides themselves on and bills themselves as the law firm that you use when you want to be counseled on legal union avoidance," says David Wheaton, "and we can see the effects of that counseling here."⁵⁴

Although Chattanooga is the only Volkswagen production facility in the world without union representation, some workers think what Volkswagen is trying to accomplish in keeping a union out of this facility could be replicated in their other plants globally.

"I think Chattanooga is kind of like the litmus test," says Steve Cochran. "They're just trying to see how much they can get away with here to push it somewhere else."⁵⁵

POLITICAL INTERFERENCE

When Volkswagen first began operations in Chattanooga, it was given hundreds of millions of dollars in tax incentives by the state in exchange for bringing in thousands of new jobs to the area, a practice that is common between corporations and state governments in the United States.⁵⁶ At the time leading up to the vote in 2014, the Chattanooga plant was producing only one car model, the Passat. Many Volkswagen workers thought another model would need to be added in order to provide greater job security and to ensure that Volkswagen would not leave Chattanooga in search of another financial incentive package from a different state.

On Feb. 10, just days before the election, Tennessee Senate Speaker Pro Tem Bo Watson held a press

conference where he publicly threatened to withhold future tax incentives for Volkswagen if the workers voted for the union.⁵⁷ "Should the workers at Volkswagen choose to be represented by the United Auto Workers," Watson stated, "then I believe any additional incentives from the citizens of the state of Tennessee for expansion or otherwise will have a very tough time passing the Tennessee Senate."⁵⁸

Bob Corker, the former Chattanooga mayor who became a U.S. senator representing Tennessee, came back to Chattanooga during the election to make perhaps the most damaging public allegation of all. Corker, who had long opposed a union at Volkswagen,⁵⁹ held a press conference on the first day of voting to announce: "I've had conversations today and based on those am assured that should the workers vote against the UAW, Volkswagen will announce in the coming weeks that it will manufacture its new mid-size SUV here in Chattanooga."⁶⁰ There had been speculation by many in recent weeks that production of the new car would occur either in the Chattanooga plant or in Puebla, Mexico.⁶¹ For workers in Chattanooga, this was a statement that struck a chord with them.

"Whenever you have a politician who is supposed to be in the know on these things saying that if you vote no, I can guarantee you'll get that, of course it's going to change some people's minds," says Steve Cochran. "Their words carry a lot of weight."⁶²

Workers believed these statements carried enough weight to sway the results of the election, as workers voted 712–626 against UAW representation.⁶³ "I think it would be a little bit erroneous to assume that this televised thing by Bob Corker didn't have something to do with that," says David Wheaton. "Claiming that if we unionized over there we weren't getting any new product. That's a threat."⁶⁴ A number of workers took this threat seriously, as worker leaders reported having conversations with their co-workers shortly after the election and learning that these statements had made them vote no when they were intending on voting yes.⁶⁵

Although Volkswagen never endorsed the statements made by the politicians, workers felt they did little to nothing in response to alleviate the fears that had been cast over the future of the plant. "You'd think you'd at least tell your workers that we're still looking at bringing another model here regardless of what happens," says

Billy Quigg. “There was no support from the company after those statements were made.”⁶⁶

“Volkswagen was very slow to respond, and actually responded after the election was already over,” adds Steve Cochran.⁶⁷

About a month later, a local television news network received confidential documents showing that Tennessee Gov. Bill Haslam had offered Volkswagen an incentive package of nearly \$300 million in exchange for creating the 1,350 jobs that production of a new model would bring to Chattanooga.⁶⁸ However, this package was contingent upon “works council discussions being concluded to the satisfaction of the State of Tennessee.”⁶⁹ When confronted about this by the network, Haslam did not deny the proposal, stating that “it’s no secret at all that we had an opinion about what should happen there.”⁷⁰

Many of the Volkswagen workers felt betrayed by the company’s response to the political interference. “I understand the business side of it,” says Cochran, “but you also sold your workforce out, too.”⁷¹

REFUSAL TO BARGAIN

Although disheartened by what had taken place in February 2014, workers in Chattanooga did not give up, and instead began organizing workers in the Skilled Trades Department. After 160 Skilled Trades employees won their union election in late 2015, there was finally some hope that Volkswagen would come to the table and bargain with them. “We thought it was a done deal, if we voted it in it was a done deal,” describes Craig Jordan.⁷²

Although Volkswagen had argued against a Skilled Trades bargaining unit in the NLRB hearing prior to the election, Volkswagen told the Skilled Trades workers it would recognize and bargain with them if they won their election. Similar statements were even published in Volkswagen’s daily newsletter, “Jump Start.”⁷³

Right before the vote, VW management called for a meeting with all of the elected officials of UAW Local 42, in which Steve Cochran felt VW officials were trying to dissuade them from holding a union vote for the Skilled Trades Department. Regardless, Cochran thought Volkswagen management had made it clear the company understood that the Skilled Trades Department was a

legal bargaining unit. “The head of HR at the time flat out said, ‘we do believe that [Skilled Trades] is a bargaining unit, we understand that,’ and the lawyer was sitting right there with him,” says Cochran.⁷⁴

Despite Volkswagen’s attempts to block the election, when the voting period had concluded on Dec. 4, 2015, the workers won by a vote of 108–48. On Dec. 7, 2015, Volkswagen published a notice in “Jump Start” that stated it would not recognize the union.⁷⁵ Workers at Volkswagen were appalled by the company’s about-face on the matter, and filed charges with the National Labor Relations Board, which sided with the union. Most recently, on Aug. 26, 2016, the NLRB ordered Volkswagen to recognize and bargain with the UAW as the exclusive collective bargaining representative of the Skilled Trades employees.⁷⁶

Workers state that Volkswagen has not sufficiently addressed the issue of why it is refusing to bargain with its employees. Troy Hunt, a six-year team member in the Paint Department, says “It’s a joke. It’s because they don’t want to split up the team. Yet in Wolfsburg they have multiple bargaining units representing their workers. Such a hypocritical argument. It’s just a stalling game played out by their legal team and legal advisers to stall the inevitable.”⁷⁷

Workers also think it’s time for VW to bargain with the union. “Even if the company wants to appeal the outcome of that election, they still have a responsibility to bargain with you,” says David Wheaton. “That has not happened. They just went ahead and appealed the outcome of our election without bargaining with us. So at this point, we’re stepping into the area of illegal union avoidance.”⁷⁸

This kind of behavior has been unseen at other Volkswagen production plants around the world, and seems to support the concern that Volkswagen may be crafting a union-busting model it can export to the rest of its global facilities.

“I’ve been told that VW was union friendly. Well, they’re not,” says Craig Jordan. “I’ve been told all along they’re good with unions, but they’re not working with us. I’m very disappointed in that.”⁷⁹

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This case study clearly shows that issues concerning workplace demands, inadequate training, exhausting schedules and disrespectful treatment exist in Volkswagen's Chattanooga facility. These problems are not linked to a few difficult jobs or a few instances of bad judgment by a handful of particular supervisors, but rather appear to affect employees across different departments and positions inside the plant.

Health and safety issues inside the plant are problematic. Repetitive motion injuries occur far too frequently and have harmful impacts on the long-term health of the workforce. Production demands, coupled with inadequate training of new hires and temporary workers, place a significant burden on all workers.

Volkswagen's insistence on the use of rotating shifts creates a huge burden on its employees, whose bodies are unable to fully adjust to their constantly changing sleep cycles. Many employees think this is the biggest health and safety factor in the plant because of how tired they feel during their shifts due to poor sleep. Furthermore, employees report that their personal lives have suffered dramatically because of how mandatory overtime is factored in to these rotating shifts.

Although Volkswagen employs many decent, well-liked supervisors, others seem to operate with impunity inside of the plant, arbitrarily harassing some workers and punishing those who speak out against poor working conditions or in support of the union. At least one employee reported it was his belief he was subjected to verbal harassment by his supervisor due to the color of his skin.

Volkswagen has shown through its engagement with union counterparts across the world that it can work effectively and productively with its manufacturing employees; however, it is clear this is not the strategy it is pursuing in the United States. By remaining silent while political interference damaged the election process in 2014, and then retaining one of the largest and most notorious union-busting law firms to fight the 2015 Skilled Trades Department NLRB election outcome in favor of forming a union, Volkswagen endangers progress toward co-determination inside the plant.

Collective bargaining offers Volkswagen's workers the best opportunity to address the issues identified by this study. Thus, to remedy these issues, Volkswagen should work with the elected leadership of UAW Local 42 to create an environment in which Volkswagen workers can freely associate and present their collective concerns. For this to occur, however, Volkswagen must impose some control over its front-line supervisory staff, and immediately cease any actions and communications that would undermine workers' interest in forming a union.

This study recommends the following:

- Volkswagen issues a written statement that it will not retaliate against Chattanooga workers who seek to engage or participate in pro-union activities or actions, and provides training to its supervisors to ensure they adhere to this pledge.
- Volkswagen agrees to uphold the international principles regarding freedom of association and bargaining rights.
- Volkswagen lives up to its 2014 commitment to recognize the UAW.
- Volkswagen agrees to immediately end its stalling tactics and sit down at the negotiating table to bargain with the UAW-represented skilled trades workers.

Endnotes

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