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Hardly a Union Hotbed, Toyota's Kentucky Plant Is a Test for Organizers

By [JEREMY W. PETERS](#)

GEORGETOWN, Ky. — For the last two decades, the [United Automobile Workers](#) union has been a constant but largely neutralized presence in this rolling patch of central Kentucky horse country.

Union organizers arrived, informational leaflets in hand, not long after [Toyota](#) opened its first American factory here 22 years ago. At shift changes, the organizers would gather outside the factory exits to pass fliers to workers as they drove home.

Most of the time, cars did not stop. And that's pretty much the attitude union organizers here have faced for the last two decades. They would occasionally rally small groups of workers, but never made much headway. Their biggest obstacle was a largely contented Toyota work force.

But now, emboldened by Toyota's plans to cut labor costs at its American factories, the U.A.W. is making its most concerted push yet to organize workers at the Japanese automaker's largest American plant.

The movement, led by a small but vocal group of workers with help from the union, is drawing attention to issues like wage stability and workplace safety. It is a departure from previous efforts, which focused mainly on gathering workers' signatures on union cards.

Organizers have seized on leaked Toyota internal documents that show the company wants to cut \$300 million in labor costs in North America by 2011. They have joined forces with community activists, local politicians and workers' rights advocates to make their case. Organizers have also enlisted the help of ministers, who are speaking out publicly on the union's behalf.

Unionizing the Georgetown plant would be an enormous victory for the U.A.W., as it would be the first time it had organized a factory wholly owned by a Japanese automaker.

The U.A.W. has never collected enough signatures in the past to force a vote by all 7,000 Georgetown workers. And even if it gets a vote, that is only the first step. Workers at [Nissan](#)'s plant in Smyrna, Tenn., have voted twice on U.A.W. membership and rejected it.

Organizing Toyota would also bolster the U.A.W.'s diminished clout at a time when Detroit's Big Three are cutting jobs, closing factories and expecting concessions from the union in ongoing contract negotiations.

The union needs a foothold in the company that is on track to displace [General Motors](#) as the world's largest automaker, said Nelson Lichtenstein, a labor historian at the [University of California](#), Santa Barbara. "Unless they can organize it, the union's power will inevitably be flushed away," he said.

Organizing Toyota promises to be difficult, and it remains unclear how much real progress will result from the latest push in Georgetown. While organizers said they have seen an increase in attendance at their regular meetings, the U.A.W. will not say how many Toyota workers are actively supporting the new effort. Toyota officials estimate the core group of union loyalists to be less than 100.

"If our team members in America decide that they need a union, that's fine," said Pete Gritton, vice president of human resources for Toyota's manufacturing operations in the United States. "But the truth of the matter, so far, has been they've not elected to go that way."

In interviews, pro-union workers at the Georgetown plant said they are fighting the perception that unions are irrelevant, even dangerous to Toyota's future.

"In the past, we were kind of like bulls in a china shop," said Tim Unger, 51, who started at the Georgetown plant 18 years ago in the plastics division and now works in quality control. "If you weren't pro-union, we didn't want anything to do with you. Now we want to take our time and find out what's on the minds of our co-workers. What don't they understand? What do they like about Toyota? What don't they like about Toyota?"

Recently, the company has taken a harder line on wages and labor costs, giving union organizers what they perceive as an opening. Just last week, Toyota told workers in Kentucky they would have to start paying a premium for health insurance for family members.

And over the last few months, Toyota management has summoned small groups of workers at its colossal vehicle assembly complex here to attend a presentation titled "Growing in a Changing Market: State of the Automotive Industry." Executives describe the presentation as a routine update for workers.

Workers are shown a map with the locations of shuttered Big Three auto plants and a breakdown of autoworkers' average wages, from Thailand to Mexico. While no Toyota executive explicitly says it, the theme of the presentation, according to workers who have seen it, is that Toyota will end up in the same troubled waters as G.M. if something does not change.

"That doesn't sit well," said Charles Hite, 41, who works on the loading dock at the Georgetown plant and has been with Toyota for 15 years. "They want people to fear losing their jobs."

Mr. Hite said that before one of the presentations recently, he gave to his colleagues copies of a news article about the millions of dollars in bonuses Toyota executive had received this year. A Toyota supervisor asked him to stop, he said.

Toyota declined to elaborate on the presentation or provide a copy of it to The [New York Times](#). But the company said it was not considering cutting wages, only looking at how it might reduce wage increases in the future and shift more costs to employees.

A year ago, the U.A.W.'s efforts might have barely caused a stir. But in February, that changed when an internal Toyota document started making its way around the factory floor. It spelled out, in part, how the company would reduce labor costs by setting hourly wages based on what other manufacturers in the area pay, not on auto industry standards.

In Kentucky, where the average worker earned about \$36,000 last year, \$70,000-a-year Toyota jobs are among the best to be found.

The company fired two employees who had distributed the document. The U.A.W. said it has filed a complaint on behalf of the two employees with the [National Labor Relations Board](#).

Terry Thurman, the new U.A.W. vice president for organizing who once led the union's Indiana and Kentucky region, pledged "all the assistance we can" at an organizing rally in nearby Lexington in March.

Toyota's cost-cutting plans were leaked just as it was about to announce another quarter of record-breaking profits. And in May, the company reported that it earned \$13.68 billion last fiscal year — its largest profit ever.

"This company is making billions of dollars, and it's going to start making us pay?" said Robert Bingaman, 53, a maintenance worker at the Georgetown plant who supports the U.A.W.

But unlike many of his co-workers, Mr. Bingaman knows what it is like to have a union job. Twenty years ago, he lost his job at a General Motors plant in Hamilton, Ohio, where he was a member of the U.A.W.

"At Toyota, whatever they want to do, they do," he said over lunch at the Big Boy down the road from the Toyota factory one recent summer afternoon. "At G.M., under a contract, they couldn't do anything without the rank and file agreeing. You had someone to fight for you."

In addition to using wages as a bone of contention, the union is hoping it can make headway with the heavy physical toll of assembly line labor.

At the U.A.W. Resource Center about a half mile from the Georgetown plant entrance, volunteers pore over injury logs from the [Occupational Safety and Health Administration](#) that track every lacerated finger and ruptured disk reported in the Georgetown plant.

They said they have already identified more than 1,800 injured workers who are no longer employed at the plant. And they are building a database to track injuries by type, to help reinforce their point that the job puts tremendous stress on a worker's body. Callers who reach the answering machine at the resource center are asked, "Have you thought about how many surgeries it takes to build a Camry?"

Toyota has disputed the notion that the Georgetown factory is a dangerous place to work. And records from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration show that the company has been cited only once since 1998 for a safety violation.

For workers like John Williams, 41, who has spent the last 18 years at the Georgetown plant, the idea of having a larger voice in Toyota has appeal.

Mr. Williams said he envies the contracts his counterparts in Detroit have. "What they have is what the Big Three negotiated with them," he said. "What we have is what Toyota gives and takes from us."

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