

UAW and IG Metall: supporting workers' rights from Bavaria to Tennessee

Transnationalizing Unions: The Case of the UAW and the IG Metall

A Case Study by Michael Fichter

In a sense, a closer relationship between IG Metall and UAW was long overdue, especially in a global auto industry that even put the two unions “under the same corporate roof” with the merger of Chrysler and Daimler AG in the 1990s.

The year was 2015. The place was far from the cold Great Lakes region where the United Auto Workers (UAW) holds most of its power, and it was an ocean away from IG Metall's headquarters in Frankfurt, Germany.

The state of Tennessee, with its low union density and business-friendly labour laws, might at first glance seem like an odd place for these two famous auto workers unions to announce what they called a Transnational Partnership Initiative (TPI) – a joint-venture between the two unions to perform labour education for the media, the public, lawmakers and employers in their respective countries – but in other ways, it made perfect sense.

The UAW and its 408,000 members have built their strength in the Great Lakes region where the American automobile manufacturing industry is centred, but foreign makers prefer the mostly union-free environment of the American South. And while that trend has always been in some ways problematic for unions, it has also been seen as an opportunity: former UAW President Bob King had vowed to pour energy into organising workers in the South, not only to grow his union but also to erase the idea that the South was by definition some sort of union-free area.

The two unions had in fact been collaborating for years, but the TPI made things public, as both unions vowed to improve wages and working conditions for workers at German-owned plants in the South and to push for the introduction of German-style works councils in order to promote a new form of labour/management cooperation.

Sören Niemann-Findeisen of IG Metall explained in a phone interview that “we have to be as global as our companies, and this is particularly true in our industry.”

The main goal, he said, was to help lower the hurdles to unionisation in places like the American South by addressing problems at US manufacturing sites early on in the process. For example, at one German auto supplier operating in the US there was intense resistance to a worker organising drive, however, IG Metall was able to talk with its owner in Germany, who Niemann-Findeisen said, didn't want to have any kind of anti-union image.

Niemann-Findeisen also didn't write off the South as hopelessly anti-union, citing the Spring Hill Tennessee General Motors plant where the UAW enjoys a 90 per cent density rate even in a right-to-work state (i.e., while by law the union must represent all workers in the bargaining unit, non-members have the right to refuse payment for those services).

In a report titled *Transnationalizing Unions. The Case of the UAW and the IG Metall* released in April 2017 by the German foundation Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, findings show that while successes in the stated goals have so far been limited, it was a necessary step in changing an outmoded domestic focus of auto union organising. Success is critical, the report noted, even for unions like IG Metall, which operate under relatively friendly labour laws.

The report, written by Michael Fichter, states: “Even if the IG Metall maintained a high level of membership density in Germany, it was dealing with corporations operating with value chains around the globe and capable of organizing production wherever most conducive to profitmaking. With their technology, these corporations have the capacity and the incentive to be able to produce better wherever cheaper, in most cases avoiding unions, and as long as there were ‘union-free’ zones around the world, the associational and institutional power IG Metall would be potentially threatened. The union had to begin finding approaches to changing this situation. A first step in this direction – to work together with the UAW – seemed to offer a plausible way of testing the viability and conditions of such an approach.”

The two unions had strategised on organising German manufacturers in several states, but the most-high profile transnational effort to come out before formalising the relationship in 2015 was the UAW's failed attempt the previous year to organise workers at a Volkswagen plant in Chattanooga, Tennessee. The failure to get a majority of workers to vote for unionisation came in large part due to the heavy anti-union political sentiment in the local government, a massive anti-union campaign by business lobbies, as well as from local Volkswagen-management.

As the report noted, the drive at Volkswagen was given a high priority for the joint coalition, but the German side of the equation had not anticipated the ferocity of the anti-union sentiment in the South. As Niemann-Findeisen himself noted, Germany is not without companies that resist union drives, but the anti-union legal industry in the United States has more money and resources and has more influence over local governments.

Yet, the report still saw this as growing pains, and was quite positive overall about the abilities of the two unions to foster growth together down the line. Rather than being discouraged, this episode firmed up the resolve of both unions. The two unions extended and deepened their ties even further, establishing the TPI as an information and educational centre that would foster exchanges between workers from the same company at production sites in Germany and the US and conduct informational seminars. Direct and ongoing contacts on a broad organisational basis help to keep both unions informed regarding relevant developments in both countries.

And it did not take long until a glimmer of good news saw the light of day. In late 2015, a smaller section of that Chattanooga plant, the robotics repair workers, voted for UAW representation. Despite continuing refusal by VW to respect the law and enter into collective bargaining negotiations, this has been a big first for UAW representation in the South. However, everybody involved has no illusion: the joint-union venture will need to do a lot more education in places like Tennessee and to raise consciousness amongst workers if it is to boost representation in the South.

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