

LABOR LOSES OUT

## Unions get no traction at Japanese U.S. carmakers

By TOM MURPHY

LAFAYETTE, Ind. (AP) Subaru worker Steve Durham remembers attending a meeting to discuss unionizing, only to be stunned by the turnout: Just 10 of the factory's 2,000-plus workers showed up.

But it wasn't until he found no takers for the union fliers he tried to distribute that reality dawned.

"I couldn't find another person to join," he said. "I ended up throwing them all in the trash. People just aren't interested."



Assembly-line worker Dave Sheehan installs a serpentine belt on a Toyota engine at the automaker's plant in Georgetown last April. AP PHOTO

Durham's experience is typical of Japanese automakers, which, with few exceptions, have avoided organized labor at the nearly dozen U.S. assembly plants they operate.

Leaders of the United Auto Workers union said recently that they want to organize employees at the U.S. operations of foreign automakers and their suppliers. But labor experts question whether they'll be successful, saying decent wages, factory location and some subtle screening all enable the non-U.S. carmakers to remain union-free.

"A union has a difficult time convincing others to join when workers already get what they perceive to be really good benefits and pay," said Steven Szakaly, an economist with the Center for Automotive Research in Ann Arbor, Mich.

Randy Bagby, another worker at the Subaru of Indiana Automotive plant about 100 km northwest of Indianapolis, agreed. He said the plant offers workers vision and health benefits similar to what friends in unionized factories receive.

"If they're giving us the benefits and pay that's comparable to what the UAW plants give, why would we want them in there messing with what we already have?"

The UAW, which once represented 95 percent of U.S. auto workers, has seen its membership drop by 60 percent, from a peak of 1.5 million in 1979 to less than 600,000 in 2005.

Toyota and Honda representatives say they've done little to keep unions at bay and insist their employees simply choose not to form unions.

But the timing of their arrival and even the locations they choose has helped.

Assembly plants for Japanese automakers first started appearing in the United States in the 1980s, about 50 years after a "tidal wave" of labor organization swept through U.S. plants, said Greg Saltzman, a labor researcher at the University of Michigan.

Japanese automakers tend to avoid union-friendly areas like Detroit, Saltzman noted.

"It's hard to be Amish in the Bronx," he said. "You're sort of influenced by the local culture."

Many build factories in areas that already have a low average wage for the labor market, Saltzman said. That means factory pay looks great regardless of whether it approaches union standards.

Last year, workers at the Toyota Motor Corp. plant in Georgetown, Ky., received more in pay and bonuses than UAW members averaged at domestic automaker factories for the first time, according to a recent Detroit Free Press analysis.

Saltzman contends that Japanese carmakers weed out union sympathizers in the hiring process by asking questions to determine whether they would likely organize.

"They want people who are going to be very willing to meet company needs like working overtime without much advance notice, things like that," he said.

Dan Sieger calls that claim "absolute nonsense." The spokesman for Toyota's North American manufacturing headquarters sees only one reason company workers have largely steered away from organized labor.

"Ultimately, our team members as a whole have decided they don't need

or want third-party representation," he said. "It's not a decision of Toyota's."

Toyota employs 17,150 production workers at four vehicle assembly plants in the United States, including a factory in Princeton, Ind., that employs more than 4,000, and recently announced plans to build a fifth in Mississippi. Unions represent workers at only one of those, a California factory Toyota co-owns with General Motors Corp.

Sieger said Toyota management works hard to keep an open relationship with assembly-line employees.

"If we're doing our job right that way, then there's probably no need for third-party representation," he said.

The UAW has tried at least three times to organize the workers at the Lafayette Subaru factory, which will start producing Camrys in a partnership with Toyota next month. Employee Ed Downham said he hopes the union keeps trying.

Downham, who wore a faded green UAW jacket as he left work on a recent weekday afternoon, has worked at the Subaru factory for 13 years. He said he's seen too many changes to things like vacation time and sick pay that benefit the company, not the employees.

"I think, with a union, they'd have to stick to their word," he said.

But coworker Durham doesn't think a union will organize anytime soon.

"From what I've seen, they're never going to get their feet in the door," he said. "People are saying, 'We don't have it so bad.' "

The Japan Times: Saturday, March 31, 2007

(C) All rights reserved

[Go back to The Japan Times Online](#)

[Close window](#)