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Is the UAW Coming to Tennessee?

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Distinctly Catholic

In the movie, *The Family That Preys*, the always wonderful Kathy Bates turns to her daughter-in-law who is lamenting her husband's affair. Bates, who shines best, I think, when playing the part of a strong southern woman, looks at her pitiable daughter-in-law and tells her to toughen up and brighten up. *"You hold all the cards,"* Bates instructs her. *"You are a wronged wife with no pre-nup."*

Today, workers at the Volkswagen plant in Chattanooga, Tennessee will vote on whether or not to join the United Auto Workers. The essential rationale for forming a union is the same everywhere: Without it, management *"holds all the cards."* But, in the case of the VW plant, there is an interesting twist on the story. Management is not fighting the effort to form a union. Indeed, VW's management, while neutral in the vote, has said it would welcome unionization because organized workers could more readily join a workers' council and work with management to run the plant, as is done at VW's other plants in Germany and throughout the world, except in the U.S. and China.

The specter of a UAW local south of the Mason-Dixon Line has occasioned all manner of fear and fright among corporate titans and the politicians who share their ideological horror at the specter of organized labor. Grover Norquist is fighting the union effort. So is inappropriately named National Right to Work Legal Defense Foundation. State Senator Bo Watson even threatened VW's management that the company would have a hard time gaining tax incentives from the GOP-controlled legislature if the UAW becomes ensconced at their Chattanooga plant.

The question asks itself: What precisely are they worried about? An artfully done billboard outside the city warns *"Detroit: Brought to you by the UAW"* which shows a pretty coarse understanding of complex socio-economic realities. Nor can the opponents of the union really be worried that increased worker participation in management decision-making would create turmoil. Such an outcome would prove their

point, yes?

No, what worries the opponents of the UAW bid is that it will work, that the workers will vote to form a union and VW will not pick up stakes and go to another, more regressive state, that the workers' councils might actually work in Tennessee as they work in their Teutonic homeland, resulting in management decisions that are not only better informed for having solicited worker input, but decisions that are easier to implement because workers are more invested in the process that led to the decision. If unions are the bane of existence, having a successful plant, operating not only with a union but with a union that helps management adopt a different management model, that will prove the lie to much of the anti-union foolishness that animates our friends on the right.

The teaching of the Catholic Church could scarcely be more clear on this issue: Workers have a right to organize that is just as foundational as an owner's right to private property. Both rights are checked only by the simultaneous requirement of Catholic social teaching that the exercise of the right to organize, like the right to property, be exercised subject to the common good. The opponents of the UAW's effort seem to think that they, and they alone, get to define the common good and the particular good at America's workplaces. They may believe that unions are bad, they may think that unions do more harm than good, but no Catholic argument supports them. And, let me voice my disappointment that there is nothing about the right of these workers to unionize that I can find on the website of the Diocese of Knoxville.

I hope the workers at the VW plant in Chattanooga will vote to form a union. But, the choice is theirs, not mine. Shame on those who, like State Senator Watson, threaten the company because it is not fighting the effort. And, let him and Mr. Norquist ponder what it says about America that China is the only country where VW says its worker council model has not worked. Do we really need to find ourselves lumped with a repressive regime like China?

Conservatives say they value freedom. Apparently, they value some people's freedom more than others. They value the freedom of other companies' management more than the freedom of VW's management to pursue its own model of plant organization. And the value the freedom of these other companies' management more than the freedom of workers to associate in a union to better protect their own interests, to make sure that management doesn't hold all the cards. Let's hope Kathy Bates is around the gates of the plant today to remind the workers that they can, if they wish, hold some cards too.

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