

NEWSLETTER

Thomas Built Tough

UAW Local 5287 workers face Right to Work head on - and win

Building a union at Thomas Built Bus in High Point, N.C., was a difficult challenge - but well worth it, according to Niels Chapman.

“Sometimes the hardest things to get are the things you cherish the most,” says Chapman, president of UAW Local 5287 and the outreach minister for Genesis Baptist Church in nearby Greensboro.

A bit of prayer was in order more than a few times during the year and a half it took to build a union at Thomas Built. After a number of stops and starts and legal delays, the victory finally was sealed June 29, when 714 workers at Thomas Built - a 59 percent majority - voted in favor of the UAW.

Thomas Built is a unit of DaimlerChrysler AG’s Freightliner division. With the victory, more than 8,500 Freightliner workers now have UAW representation at eight Freightliner facilities. Seven organizing wins involving more than 6,500 workers have taken place during the last two years.

As America’s labor unions debate the best way to reverse the trend of declining union membership, UAW supporters at Freightliner mounted the most successful organizing drive among manufacturing workers anywhere in the United States in the past decade. It wasn’t easy. To claim a victory at Thomas Built, union supporters had to:

- Win two different elections.
- Beat back legal challenges filed by attorneys from the anti-union National Right to Work Legal Defense Foundation.
- Rebut scare tactics about plant closings floated by the local business community.

During the campaign, for example, High Point Chamber of Commerce President Tom Dayvault claimed that a victory by union supporters would harm efforts to develop the local economy. “It is always easier,” he told the High Point Enterprise newspaper, “to recruit jobs in a union-free environment.”

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THOMAS BUILT TOUGH CONTINUED

Dayvault doesn't have his facts straight about the impact of the UAW on manufacturing jobs in North Carolina. What's really happened at Freightliner since 2003 is that the company has added jobs - more than 3,200 new hires. As workers negotiated new contracts with pay raises and improved health and safety conditions, 2,500 jobs were added at Freightliner's parts plant in Gastonia and at its Cleveland assembly facility, where workers organized in 2003. Also, 700 jobs were added at the Freightliner assembly plant in Mount Holly, which was first organized in 1990. The UAW's success at winning good contracts and expanding jobs at Freightliner, says Local 5287's Chapman, shows that it's time for all sides to reach out and work together.

"We have an open door," he says. "We definitely want to extend an invitation to everybody, no matter how you voted, to see what we're truly all about. This union is about helping working people."

Thomas Built, a leading manufacturer of school buses, was a family-owned firm for many years, and the Thomas family was adamant about keeping their factory union-free.

In 2000, however, they sold the business to Freightliner. UAW Vice President Nate Gooden has a seat on the supervisory board of DaimlerChrysler AG, Freightliner's corporate parent. German corporations are required by law to include worker representatives at the top level of corporate decision-making.

Gooden has advocated strongly for DaimlerChrysler to respect workers' rights in all its facilities. In 2003 Freightliner agreed to a card-check and neutrality procedure in all its U.S. manufacturing plants.

Under a card-check procedure, a company agrees to recognize a union once a majority of workers signs union authorization cards. Typically the expedited process avoids the legal delays and in-plant polarization that can accompany an election supervised by the National Labor Relations Board.

Using card check, workers at Freightliner's Gastonia and Cleveland plants voted in favor of UAW representation in March 2003. The card-check agreement covered only manufacturing plants, but workers at other Freightliner facilities also caught on to the organizing wave, using NLRB-supervised elections.

In April workers at one of the company's parts warehouses in Duluth, Ga., voted to become part of the UAW, and workers at two Freightliner pre-delivery inspection facilities followed suit in May 2003.

In April 2004 a majority of workers at Thomas Built - a manufacturing plant that was covered by the card-check agreement - signed UAW cards. The company agreed to recognize the union and negotiations began for a first contract. But attorneys from Right to Work, the Virginia-based anti-union group founded by business owners, filed a challenge to the card check at Thomas Built.

The Right to Work attorneys said workers were "coerced" into signing union cards, an allegation that drew a sharp rebuke from UAW Region 8 Director Gary Casteel.

"We had an extensive hearing," said Casteel, "and not a single worker could be found who said they were 'coerced' into signing a union card. The truth is these people don't want anybody to have the right to form a union under any circumstances. They're just a front group for the worst type of narrow-minded, anti-union employers."

Although Right to Work attorneys had no witnesses to any alleged "coercion," they do have a \$15 million annual budget and a staff of more than 200 full-time lawyers and lobbyists.

To avoid endless legal delays, the UAW agreed to set aside the results of the April 2004 card check, which set the stage for the June 20 NLRB-supervised election.

"The anti-union groups wanted to keep us tied up in court for years," said Chapman. "That's not good for our members or the company. We put the decision right back where it belongs - before the workers in our plant. We got a strong 'yes' for our union, and now we're ready to go back to the bargaining table, stronger than ever."