



Nissan Burns Mississippi

Failure to deliver on \$1.3 billion investment galvanizes activists.

BY ROGER BYBEE

The state of Mississippi, long suffering as the poorest in the nation, has nonetheless just shelled out the largest package of subsidies ever granted to an auto firm. The state has committed an estimated \$1.33 billion in public funds to the highly profitable Nissan Motor Company for a \$2 billion auto-assembly plant outside Canton, a small hamlet west of Jackson. The eye-popping size of the incentive package for Nissan—revealed in May in a comprehensive study of state and local incentives by the Good Jobs First research group—has accelerated the growth of a vibrant social movement in support of Nissan workers’ right to unionize. (The United Auto Workers (UAW) is actively trying to organize the Nissan plant.)

“The \$1.3 billion resonates like the Wall St. bailout all over again,” says State Rep. Jim Evans (D-70th), who also organizes workers for the AFL-CIO and serves as president of the Mississippi Alliance for Immigrant Rights.

“[H]ere you have the state government turning down billions in federal money for Obamacare to cover 300,000 Mississippians over the next ten years,” Evans points out, referring to the decision of Republican governor Phil Bryant and GOP legislators. “But then they have been giving \$1.3 billion to Nissan. It’s the worst set of decisions imaginable.”

The huge giveaway to Nissan, which earned \$3.3 billion in profits internationally last year, stands in stark contrast to the state’s pervasive poverty. At 21.6%, Mississippi’s poverty rate is the highest in the country, more than half again as high as the national average. It also has the lowest median household income of any state—at just under \$37,000, only 73% of the U.S. average. Over recent years,



Nissan workers in Canton, Miss., meet with actor and activist Danny Glover (in plaid) in Canton July 2012. Credit: Sterling Photo.

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Mississippi has witnessed the highest growth in income inequality in the United States. The state faces urgent needs in health, yet devotes the third lowest amount of any state to health care, with predictably negative outcomes on a variety of measures. Mississippi ranks fifth lowest on education spending, and is tied for last in percentage of high-school students who graduate. This juxtaposition of lavish private subsidies and unmet public needs is touching a raw nerve among many Mississippians, especially African-Americans, who make up 37% of state residents and 80% of the Nissan workforce in the state.

While being offered the mammoth giveaway, Nissan has failed to live up to its end of the bargain, which was expected to result in jobs averaging at least \$19.70 an hour, according to the Good Jobs First report. According to more recent estimates, 35% to 40% of the 5,600 workers at Canton have been hired through temp agencies at wages of \$9.50 to \$12 an hour, far below the \$22 an hour that permanent Nissan workers typically receive. Nissan’s failure to abide by the terms of the incentive deal has condemned some 1,800 Mississippians to poverty-level status despite working 40 or more hours a week.

The absence of a union also prevents Nissan from taking seriously the ideas of workers committed to improving production and safety at the plant, tool-and-die technician Mike Thornberry told *Dollars & Sense*. Thornberry is a member of Nissan Workers Committee for a Fair Election.

Nissan has been waging an all-out war of words against unionism, expressed in captive-audience meetings of workers, incessant anti-union messages on TV monitors throughout the plant, and threats of shutting down the plant

in the event that workers unionize. The company has, meanwhile, denied union supporters equal access to their fellow workers to speak with them about unionization. Such company practices have drawn condemnation by activists. “We in the NAACP believe that workers should have a voice in the workplace free of intimidation and retaliation,” said the state organization’s president, Derrick Johnson, who also is a member of the Mississippi Alliance for Fairness at Nissan (MAFFAN), a group of community leaders who support the Canton workers in their fight to organize.

Contributing to a widely felt sense of second-class treatment is Nissan’s decision to exclude Canton workers from the same right to vote for union representation—without heavy-handed management opposition—that it has granted elsewhere around the world. Father Jeremy Tobin, a white Catholic priest and active leader of

MAFFAN, pointed out how Nissan has been willing to accept unionization by workers in numerous nations, including Japan, Brazil, South Africa, Mexico, Australia, Russia, Spain, and the United Kingdom. “Why not Mississippi, too?” demands Father Tobin.

In the eyes of some Mississippi activists, Nissan’s intransigence against genuinely democratic election procedures in the plant parallels new moves by Republican state officials to impose restrictive “voter ID” laws clearly aimed at suppressing the vote of blacks, Latinos, and college students. “Voting without intimidation in the plant” is a natural extension of the historic fight for full voting rights, says Rep. Evans. Both inside the Nissan plant and across Mississippi, “voter suppression has continued in various forms. That’s criminal in a democracy.”

The corporation’s efforts to crush union organizing have spawned growing support in the plant and increasing activism both in Mississippi and beyond. Much of the activity is driven by MAFFAN, which has catalyzed the efforts of leaders like Rep. Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS), the NAACP’s Johnson, Rev. Isiac Jackson, Jr. (president of the General Missionary Baptist State Convention of Mississippi and MAFFAN chairperson), Father Tobin, numerous other clergy, and organizations including the Alliance for Immigrant Rights. MAFFAN has emerged as far more than a “letterhead” organization limited to prominent figures, and has been actively speaking out and organizing across the state, nation, and internationally.

Also active in the movement is the Student Justice Alliance, based at six primarily African-American colleges in the South and seeking to reach more, said Joshua Dedmond, a graduate of Tougaloo College. Dedmond is currently devoting his time to activities with Concerned Students for a Better Nissan, which has begun leafleting

Nissan dealerships in Miami, Atlanta, and Washington, D.C.

Another prominent supporter is actor Danny Glover, who grew up in a union household and was an activist in college. Glover has spoken to workers in Canton and elsewhere, addressed college audiences, and led pro-union delegations to auto shows across North America. He also brought MAFFAN leaders to South Africa in May. The South Africa trip was one part of a strategy by union supporters to draw heavily on solidarity among Nissan workers around the world. Among the international voices speaking out for union rights at the Canton plant has been former Brazil President Luiz Inácio “Lula” da Silva, himself a former metalworker and charismatic union leader.

The movement in support of the Nissan workers draws its inspiration from Dr. Martin Luther King, who stressed that civil rights and economic rights are inextricably linked battles for human dignity. The labor and civil rights movements share, in Dr. King’s words, “a dream of a land where men will not take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few.” **D&S**

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SOURCES: Associated Press, “AP analysis: Census Bureau report shows Mississippi education spending at \$7,934 per student, among nation’s lowest,” May 26, 2013; Martin Luther King, Jr., *All Work Has Dignity*, edited and introduced by Michael Honey (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011); Phil Mattera and Kasia Tarczynska, “A Good Deal for Mississippi? A report on Taxpayer Assistance to Nissan in Canton, Mississippi,” Good Jobs First, May 2013, updated June 2013 (good-jobsfirst.org); Elizabeth McNichol, Douglas Hall, David Cooper, and Vincent Palacios, “Pulling Apart: A State-By-State Analysis Of Income Trends,” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities and Economic Policy Institute, Nov. 15, 2012 (cbpp.org); Bill Fletcher, “Black Students Take on Nissan,” *The Progressive*, June 2012 (progressive.org); Danny Glover, “Americans Turn to South Africa for Aid,” *Huffington Post*, June 6, 2013 (huffingtonpost.com); “Mississippi Public Health Data,” Trust for American Health (healthyamericans.org).

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