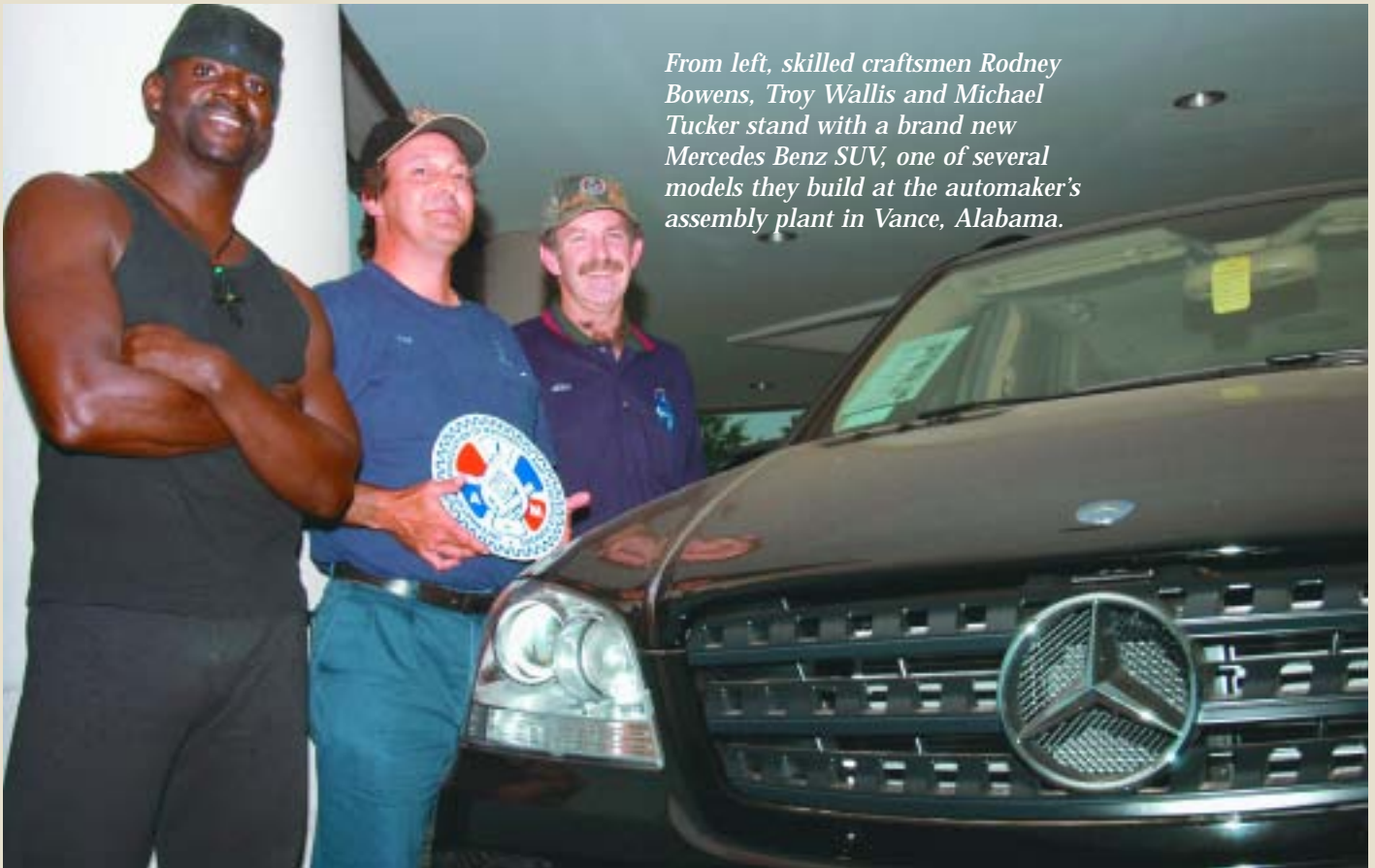


On the Road to



From left, skilled craftsmen Rodney Bowens, Troy Wallis and Michael Tucker stand with a brand new Mercedes Benz SUV, one of several models they build at the automaker's assembly plant in Vance, Alabama.

Less than 200 miles west of the locomotive pit in Atlanta, GA where 19 rail workers founded the IAM in 1888, another band of determined workers are following in the footsteps of those first Machinists.

Meeting regularly in a small storefront office outside Tuscaloosa, Alabama, dozens of workers who assemble Mercedes-Benz R, M and GL Class vehicles are setting their sights on the same goals that inspired the earliest Machinists: a voice in the workplace and respect on the job.

These latter-day labor pioneers are seeking something

else too, the right to negotiate a defined benefit pension that is not hostage to the stock market and health care benefits that are not doled out grudgingly and arbitrarily by management.

Turbulent Industry

“This campaign is about protecting good jobs and making them better,” said Grand Lodge Representative Don Barker.

“The forces roiling the U.S. auto industry go far beyond troubled car makers and parts suppliers,” explained Barker. “Wage cuts imposed at a bankrupt company can inspire reverse pat-

tern bargaining – even at healthy companies. The need for a contract that protects current pay rates has never been greater.”

In 1997, Mercedes-Benz became the first foreign-owned auto manufacturer to open an auto assembly plant in Alabama after winning more than \$250 million in tax incentives to locate in rural Tuscaloosa County.

Following the move by Mercedes-Benz, a succession of foreign car makers beat a path to Alabama, including Toyota in Huntsville, Hyundai in Hope Hull and Honda in Lincoln.

Combined with local

Mercedes

parts suppliers, the “transplants” have triggered a 44 percent increase in Alabama’s auto industry employment in the past two years alone.

Heralded by developers and politicians as a state without a high union presence, Alabama actually has a higher percentage of union members than many Southern states.

Union Tradition

With more than 7,500 IAM members and local lodges more than 100 years old, the Machinists are an established force in Alabama and well-poised to build on their 12,000 members in the automotive and supplier industry nationwide.

Work rules that change on a whim and arbitrary discipline are inspiring Mercedes-Benz workers to seek the security of a collective bargaining agreement. But a secure pension is also on their minds.

“The 401-k plan we have here is nothing more than a roll of the dice,” said Bobby Ray Thomas, a coal miner before joining the Mercedes workforce nine years ago. “We need a defined benefit pension.”

Thomas is one of many Mercedes workers with past

Roadside billboards and television ads in rural Alabama help carry the Machinists’ message of justice on the job, patriotism and community service.

union experience who knows a contract can protect workers from becoming an easy target when sales falter or competitive pressure increases.

“Gas prices won’t have to stay above \$3 for very long before the sales of SUV’s produced here begin to feel the effect,” said the IAM’s Barker. “Without a contract in place, there isn’t anything to prevent management from changing wages, eliminating benefits or further increasing health care co-payments.”

Worldwide Support

The IAM campaign at Mercedes is drawing support from unions around the world, including letters of solidarity from IG Metal, the 2.7 million-member European labor federation and the 140,000-member Australian Workers’ Union.

Mercedes is highly unionized outside North America. In Germany, 95 percent of workers are represented by



Grand Lodge Representative Don Barker explains how a collective bargaining agreement can protect a good job from unilateral cost cutting moves by company officials.

unions and elsewhere in the world, nearly all Mercedes facilities with more than 1,000 employees have union representation.

“I’ve seen the layoffs, the outsourcing and the changes to our benefits,” said paint shop worker Jeremy Kimbrell, 28. “We need to do what we can to protect what we have. We need to do it for ourselves and for those who don’t know how much they have to lose.”

