



## **Labor Union Pins Hope for the Future on Efforts to Organize Smithfield Foods Plant**

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CHARLOTTE — A massive pork-processing plant near a tiny North Carolina town is the setting for what could be a landmark battle between business and organized labor, according to the April issue of Business North Carolina magazine. The Washington, D.C.-based United Food and Commercial Workers International Union has been battling Virginia-based Smithfield Foods for 16 years over the right to represent workers at the factory near Tar Heel. The union has lost two representation elections during that period but claims the company cheated both times, and it has the backing of the National Labor Relations Board, which has ordered new elections. UFCW wants rules guaranteeing company neutrality with “meaningful sanctions.” The company says the union wants to be able to organize workers without an election, simply by signing cards authorizing it to represent them.

Meanwhile, union representation of the U.S. work force continues to fall — from 23% in 1983 to 13% in 2007. Experts say labor needs a big victory, and there would be no sweeter place to get it than North Carolina, the least unionized state in the nation. Stakes are just as high for the company. Because it controls hog production and slaughtering, a strike at the Tar Heel plant — with about 5,000 employees, the world’s largest pork-processing factory — could result in the company being stuck with tens of thousands of pigs. That’s why even a third election might not be decisive: Both sides have too much at risk to give up.

Business North Carolina is a Charlotte-based statewide monthly magazine that focuses on the people, events and trends that shape business in North Carolina. Since it began publication in 1981, it has won more than 80 national awards for its writing, reporting and design.

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