

An Ohio Town Struggles Between Biden's Clean Energy Agenda and Union Support

Contract talks at an electric vehicle battery plant in Lordstown could have even more of an impact than the autoworkers' strike on the labor standards of the emerging electric-vehicle industry.

By Jonathan Weisman

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In the shadow of a shuttered General Motors plant in Lordstown, Ohio, far from the United Automobile Workers' picket lines, the U.A.W. and the management of an electric vehicle battery plant are locked in a wholly different conflict.

It may not have the cachet of the national contract talks that have prompted the strikes that [expanded on Friday to around 40 plants](#) and distribution centers, affecting more than 18,000 workers, but the negotiations unfolding in northeast Ohio could more directly answer one of the most burning questions facing President Biden as he heads into his re-election campaign: Will the transition to a clean energy economy yield a bright future for American workers, or will it consign a large cohort of them to low-wage, minimal-benefit jobs that leave voters in some of the most critical swing states pining for an ecologically unsound but better-paid past?

U.A.W. officials take pains to say the talks in Lordstown between the autoworkers union and Ultium Cells, a joint venture between G.M. and LG Energy Solution in South Korea that is building the fuel cells to power G.M.'s electric vehicles, are not directly linked to the strikes. But because batteries will replace much of the mechanics that consume the labor of conventional auto work, the Ultium talks could prove critical to the electric vehicle transition — and have captured the attention of Republicans and Democrats alike.

Former President Donald J. Trump, the Republican front-runner, will be in Michigan on Wednesday — the day of the second primary debate — to argue that union leaders should undercut Mr. Biden's clean-energy agenda. One of his protégés, Senator J.D. Vance, Republican of Ohio, specifically pointed to the struggles of Ultium workers laboring near the old G.M. plant.

“Up the road from the once-iconic Lordstown Assembly Complex, where 15,000 union workers once assembled millions of cars, now stands a battery plant that employs a fraction of the workers at a fraction of the wages,” [he wrote in the newspaper of Toledo](#), Ohio, where U.A.W. workers have walked off the job at a sprawling Jeep complex. “Autoworkers at the Toledo Assembly Complex and Toledo Transmission can look to Lordstown for a cautionary tale of what Joe Biden has in store for them.”

Democrats and their union allies say the notion that an electric-vehicle transition driven by the auto industry can simply be stopped is absurd.

“I love the internal combustion engine. There’s nothing like the sound of a small-block V-8 just rumbling down the street,” said Ethan Surganevic, a sheet-metal worker who maintains Ultium’s heating and air-conditioning systems. “But as we progress into the future, we need some sort of renewable energy source. We need to stop relying on fossil fuels.”

But Democrats, too, have their worries.

“These workers feel betrayed because presidents of both parties, from Bush to Clinton, then Bush 2, then Obama, then Trump, have sold them out,” said Senator Sherrod Brown, a pro-union Democrat who faces a tough re-election bid next year in Ohio. “We keep pushing the White House to do more.” Mr. Brown said Friday morning that he had encouraged Mr. Biden to join the U.A.W. picket lines. [On Friday afternoon, the president announced](#) he would, in Michigan on Tuesday.

As the only battery plant organized by a union in the country, Lordstown Ultium is expected to produce a first-ever wage, benefit and worker safety contract, which in turn will influence labor demands in battery plants springing up all over the country.

Yet workers here feel the Biden administration has paid far too little attention to the contract negotiations. Once at full capacity, Ultium could reap tax benefits totaling \$1.2 billion a year through legislation signed by the president to speed up the transition to electric vehicles. That is leverage that workers say Mr. Biden is not using.

“If this is truly something they support, they could probably back in a little more,” Eric Manaro, 34, a crew leader in the Ultium packaging department. “I mean, they’ve never been down to the area. You know, proof to the pudding.”

George Goranitis, 33, an Ultium team leader and U.A.W. bargaining representative, went further. “Biden and his team, I honestly truly believe they failed,” he said, adding, “there should have been certain terms and regulations when they gave this money out.”

White House officials on Friday said they were doing all they can to support U.A.W. workers. Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm called the G.M. chief executive, Mary Barra, twice to ensure a fair union election last December and pointedly did not give final approval to Ultium loan guarantees until after the vote.

“The president has made clear from the start his full commitment to fighting for electric vehicle jobs — including battery jobs — that are good paying, safe U.A.W. jobs that can support a family and bolster the middle class,” said Gene Sperling, Mr. Biden’s envoy to the U.A.W. and Big Three automakers.

But some of the most pro-union provisions in Mr. Biden's economic agenda were stripped out of the final Inflation Reduction Act. Officials also conceded that they had not communicated their efforts well enough to reach workers like Mr. Manaro and Mr. Goranitis.

Like many workers in Lordstown, both Mr. Manaro and Mr. Goranitis are familiar with presidential politics. There may be no factory town in the United States that has been more of a political football in the past 15 years. In 2009, after he bailed out Detroit, President [Obama drove a Chevy Cruze](#) on the factory floor as a victory lap. Mr. Manaro and Mr. Goranitis were there as assembly line workers. In 2018, G.M. shut down the factory anyway, provoking [a tirade by President Trump](#), who then engineered the sale of the plant to a start-up company making electric pickup trucks.

As the plant teetered, he [told workers the jobs were](#) "[all coming back](#)."

"Don't move, don't sell your house," he counseled.

The [start-up, Lordstown Motors](#), went [belly-up](#), filing for bankruptcy in June.

U.A.W. union members in a Democratic region that [swung solidly behind Mr. Trump](#) are deeply split on the electric revolution in which they are key participants.

Mr. Surganevic said he was "no fan" of Mr. Trump's. Mr. Manaro and Mr. Goranitis are. Mr. Manaro even credited the former president's browbeating of Ms. Barra for her decision to site Ultium in Lordstown, although construction was completed well after he left office and the company denied its location had anything to do with Mr. Trump.

Mr. Biden, it seems, cannot get a break.

For all the downturns and false starts in Lordstown, it is no wonder that many in the Trumbull and Mahoning counties, first hit by the steep decline of steel and then manufacturing, are viewing any new hope for the Mahoning Valley with skepticism — and that Republicans like Mr. Trump are appealing to voters by evoking a return to some halcyon days, just as he did with coal and steel.

But, said A.J. Sumell, an economist at the Center for Working Class Studies of Youngstown State University, the electric vehicle transition is happening, whether Mr. Trump wants it or not.

When the G.M. plant finally closed for good, it was down to a single shift, with 1,600 workers. Ultium, whose plant sprawls across 2.8 million square feet and which started the year with 1,100 workers, is now at 1,400, with 1,700 expected to be working there within another year.

"Ultium Cells' work force is the foundation of a dynamic new industry that is transforming American transportation and leading the way to an all-E.V. future," Katie Burdette, an Ultium spokeswoman, said.

About 600 more are working at the old G.M. facility, but for the Taiwanese contract manufacturer Foxconn, which just started producing [boutique electric tractors](#).

For now, though, that old G.M. plant is a shadow of its former self, with a scattering of cars in its vast parking lot, which is sprouting weeds, and only a fraction of the shop floor in use.

But if pay, benefits and workplace safety concerns can be put to rest at Ultium, the president might get some credit for the clean-energy transition he helped set in motion from the workers actually doing it.

“This plant is going to be the pattern for everything that’s coming in the future,” said Tim O’Hara, who was the vice president of the Lordstown U.A.W. local when the G.M. plant shut down.

The negotiations have already produced results, even before a final contract is reached. In [late August, Ultium announced](#) an interim agreement that gave 1,100 workers an immediate 25 percent pay raise and back pay ranging from \$3,000 to \$7,000. Mr. Sumell said that lifted hourly wages from the minimum of \$16.50 to a starting wage of \$20 and a top wage of about \$24, still considerably lower than the \$32 that G.M. once paid its top earners but likely better than most battery makers springing up with huge subsidies signed into law by Mr. Biden.

The U.A.W. still has [significant beefs with Ultium](#), especially with what it says are unsafe working conditions that should be covered by the safety provisions of the national contract. And the talks “have a ways to go,” said Josh Ayers, the bargaining chairman at U.A.W. Local 1112.

Workers would like Mr. Biden to give the process a nudge.

“If he would come out and say these battery plants need to be unionized, need to go U.A.W. or whatever, then we would throw our backs behind him,” Mr. Surganevic said. “But people are seeing the government threw billions of dollars in low-interest loans to the big corporation and didn’t tell them how they were supposed to spend it.”

Of Mr. Biden, he added, “I think he is playing it too safe.”