

The Auto Industry Is Going Green. Will Workers Go Along for the Ride?

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UPDATED: AUGUST 12, 2021 12:30 PM EDT | ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED: AUGUST 11, 2021 9:37 PM EDT

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andering around the sprawling 6.2 million-sq.-ft. Lordstown Motors assembly plant in Ohio, it's tempting to imagine a green future that is full of jobs. The company's signature product is a high-performing electric pickup truck, and around the facility workers are buzzing about, getting ready to bring it into production.

In one corner, according to company officials giving TIME a rare tour, the firm will build its cutting-edge motors, which will be located in each wheel. A short golf-cart ride away, engineers explain how the company will assemble the lithium-ion battery packs that will power the trucks instead of diesel fuel. And while an army of robots sit idle, ready to be put to use assembling the vehicle, company officials insist they will soon be hiring rapidly. At full capacity, the company says, the facility will be able to churn out hundreds of thousands of trucks every year, a best-case scenario that would make Lordstown Motors a major player in the American auto industry and revitalize a part of the country that has been left behind by a series of big industrial departures.

But there's a reason one local official calls this part of Ohio the "land of broken promises." The Lordstown Motors jobs may be green, but it's an open question

whether they will be good—and how many of them there will be. Unlike the 10,000-plus people who used to make General Motors automobiles at this same building, Lordstown Motors employees do not belong to a union. Today, the plant employs only around 500 people, and it's unclear how many will ultimately work in the facility. For many locals, there's an air of uncertainty brought by recent headlines: Lordstown Motors is under federal investigation for allegedly misleading investors. The company's CEO and CFO both resigned in June.

The combination of its vaulting promise and tenuous future captures well the larger state of play in the world of green jobs. As the auto industry rapidly transforms—moving from the internal combustion engine that has defined road transportation for more than 100 years to electric vehicles—workers and manufacturing communities are waiting anxiously to see what the scramble to lower the nation's emissions will mean for them. On the one hand, building electric vehicles in communities like the Mahoning Valley, the region where Lordstown is located, promises to create the jobs of the future, resilient to the wave of imminent changes that will come as the post-pandemic economy rebuilds and modernizes. On the other, the picture of what an auto-manufacturing job in the new green economy looks like remains fuzzy.

The growth of electric-vehicle manufacturing in the U.S. could drive a renaissance for workers, creating new paths for unionization, training opportunities and better salaries. Or it could lead to lower wages, slashed benefits and a smaller workforce—and that's just for the jobs that remain in the U.S.

The stakes rose dramatically on Aug. 5, when President Biden gathered executives and labor officials on the South Lawn of the White House to announce new vehicle-efficiency standards and a goal of making 50% of new-car sales electric by 2030. "There's no turning back," said Biden, with U.S.-made electric trucks parked in the driveway behind him. "The

question is whether we'll lead or fall behind in the race for the future. It's whether we'll build these vehicles and the batteries that got them to where they are here in the United States, or if we're going to have to rely on other countries for those batteries; whether or not the job to build these vehicles and batteries are good-paying union jobs, jobs with benefits, jobs that are going to sustain continued growth of the middle class."

Across the nation, auto companies, local officials and union leaders are trying to chart a path through this uncertain, fast-moving moment. Small towns and state governments are jockeying to capture their share of the emerging green economy, enticing electric automakers to invest in their backyards with tax incentives and worker-training programs. Legacy automakers are rethinking their businesses from the ground up, poised to spend tens of billions of dollars in the process, while union leaders are fighting to maintain a voice in the evolving industry. Meanwhile, the Biden Administration is trying to use the federal dime to shape the industry's transition in a way that will ultimately support communities.

The auto industry is not the only sector staring into the green unknown. Study after study shows that on a global scale, transitioning industry to a low-carbon economy will create new jobs, but those jobs won't necessarily be in the same places, go to the same people, or offer the same pay and benefits. In the energy sector, for example, the International Labour Organization found that addressing climate change will create 24 million jobs globally while eliminating 6 million. This trend carries across large swaths of the economy.

But the science of climate change is urgent, and even the most wizened labor advocates acknowledge that such complexities cannot be an excuse for inaction. Instead, they say, this moment must be viewed as an opportunity to create the best jobs as early as possible. "All of these

decisions on electric vehicles and clean energy... will need to be worker-centered,” says Senator Sherrod Brown, an Ohio Democrat and longtime supporter of organized labor. “That will make all the difference.”

In eastern Ohio, residents are watching—hopeful, but not naive to the pitfalls and challenges ahead. They want Lordstown Motors to fulfill its promise of anchoring a new “Voltage Valley” that will bring thousands of jobs back to the area. Despite the uncertainty over the federal investigations the company faces, Lordstown Motors says things are on track. “At the end of the day, [community members] will see us producing a truck,” says Jane Ritson-Parsons, the company’s chief operating officer. And locals want to believe them. “We want what’s best for the valley economically, so we don’t want to see this project fail,” says Tim O’Hara, a GM assembly worker who served as the president of the local branch of the United Auto Workers (UAW) before moving to a GM plant in Kentucky. “We’re kind of in a wait-and-see situation about how this all turns out.”

Lordstown Motors employees gather after work at Ross’ Eatery & Pub

Ross Mantle for TIME

Driving through the Mahoning Valley, a flat expanse between Cleveland and Pittsburgh with 530,000 residents, it’s hard to miss the region’s industrial roots—and the reverence for the workers who built it. The city of Youngstown, about 15 miles southeast of the Lordstown Motors plant, is home to the Youngstown Historical Center of Industry & Labor, celebrating the history of the Valley’s steel industry. You can’t drive across town without spotting a UAW bumper sticker. At Ross’ Eatery and Pub, the local bar, union gear is displayed alongside Marines paraphernalia and hunting trophies.

GM was once at the center of this community. The more than 10,000 workers the company employed in the region at the assembly plant's peak supported thousands of other jobs. But changing consumer preferences and globalization destabilized everything, and the company's hold on the region loosened. In 2017, GM cut the first shift from the Lordstown plant, which at the time produced the Chevy Cruze; by the end of 2018 the company had told workers the entire facility would close. At Ross' Eatery, a poster hangs on the wall of the last car produced there, on March 6, 2019.

Mayor William "Doug" Franklin of Warren, a city a short drive from the plant, understands the personal impact of Mahoning Valley's booms and busts. His father worked in a local steel mill and his mother at a local auto supplier. Before becoming mayor, Franklin himself worked at GM for 25 years. He now describes himself as a "UAW retiree."

But Franklin doesn't want to talk about the Mahoning Valley's past. Instead of meeting at the historic mayor's office in Warren, he asked to meet a few blocks away at BRITE, a local nonprofit that supports energy-tech startups, which is trying to build an electric-vehicle ecosystem in the area. Franklin wants to see a full-scale rebranding of the region, making the Mahoning Valley a center for electric-vehicle manufacturing that will bring job retraining, private investment and new technical jobs. "We know how to take a punch and how to recover; that's just in our DNA," he says. "This provides us a great opportunity to change our brand from the Steel Valley to the Voltage Valley."

The shift began in earnest in 2019, when Lordstown Motors formed a new firm to take over the GM facility and produce an electric truck. On Dec. 5, GM announced its own EV project just next door: a battery-cell-assembly plant called Ultium Cells, which is scheduled to open next year. With those two anchors, small startups have flocked to the region, working in everything from energy storage to solar power, eager to

benefit from the electric-vehicle hub that seems to be taking shape. “There will be a couple thousand jobs that show up here in the next three to five years, based purely on the location,” says Rick Stockburger, who runs BRITE.

More of these hubs could be on the way. Major automakers including GM, Ford and Stellantis are each spending tens of billions to prepare for an all-electric future. “This is transformational,” says Gerald Johnson, GM’s head of global manufacturing. “It’s the biggest technological change this industry has seen in over 100 years. This is going from buggies to engines.”

It has also given automakers an opportunity to think strategically about where to invest—and there’s no guarantee that they will do so in the same places they built the internal combustion engine. Companies are selecting sites based on a range of criteria, from geography and transportation access to the local workforce. And cities, towns and states are fighting to prove that they’re the best suited to absorb those jobs. The rapid EV investment in eastern Ohio “isn’t a surprise to us,” says Jonathan Bridges, who heads JobsOhio’s efforts to recruit automotive companies to the state. “We’ve been actively working to position Ohio to be in that next generation of propulsion.”

Communities with deep histories in the automotive industry may have some natural advantage in this race, such as hosting an old plant that can be refurbished. But there’s no doubt that the change will also be disruptive. Making an electric vehicle is a less labor-intensive process than producing one of its gas-powered counterparts; many of the components under the hood of a car with an internal combustion engine simply aren’t needed in an electric vehicle. Automakers estimate that they will require 30% less labor to produce an electric vehicle than a gas-powered one. Many companies in the supply chain that make parts for cars will cease to exist entirely.

That creates new problems for the workers who remain. With fewer auto jobs than job seekers, companies may try to pay industry workers less. That's difficult to do under current union contracts, but many auto companies have already begun to outsource work to subsidiaries and partners that are not unionized. While Ultium Cells, for example, says it won't stand in the way of a union, workers will need to organize to join one. In any event, pay is expected to be significantly less than what UAW workers earned at GM. Ford too has invested in a separate battery company, which may or may not be unionized one day. Some startups, like Lordstown Motors, are not unionized at all. And earlier this year a federal judge found that Tesla, now the biggest incumbent EV maker, had illegally sought to discourage union participation at the company. "A significant number of jobs are in jeopardy," says Marick Masters, a professor of management at Wayne State University. "And some of the jobs that are going to replace them may be nonunion, paying considerably less than the going rate."

There's also the skills challenge; many of the new jobs will likely require different technical capabilities than traditional auto-industry workers typically have. Software engineers, chemists and technical experts will be more in demand, while the engineers and technicians who spent their careers mastering components like the transmission will find their skills effectively irrelevant.

In Ohio, state and federal funds are already being put toward re-skilling. The Excellence Training Center at Youngstown State University, for example, is a former juvenile-correctional facility that recently got a government-funded \$12 million makeover and began classes in July to provide locals with skills they will need to work at the new battery-cell-manufacturing plant. On the ground level, 3-D printers churned out YSU-themed tchotchkes to show off what they can do. In a vast second-floor space, more robots stood at the ready for the next trainee to take the wheel and learn how to operate them. "Higher ed is not meeting the

needs of industry,” says Jennifer Oddo, executive director of the training center. “But industry can’t wait.”

Competition for this new generation of vehicle will be fierce, and some states are willing to spend big to incentivize. Around 500 miles southwest of the Mahoning Valley, in downtown Nashville, Bob Rolfe’s office feels more C-suite than state-government administrator. From a corner perch on the 27th floor of a skyscraper, Rolfe, who runs Tennessee’s Department of Economic & Community Development, surveys the city landscape as he works to bring new business here.

Tennessee is ahead of the curve in the American race to woo electric-vehicle investment: GM, Nissan and Volkswagen have all committed billions to build electric cars in the state, which already has auto-industry operations in 88 of its 95 counties. In the offices his department has set up overseas, from the United Kingdom to Japan, Rolfe’s pitch to electric-vehicle makers has been simple: Tennessee is “pro-business.” The state doesn’t have a personal income tax, it funds workforce-development programs, and it has billions of dollars in tax incentives at the ready to offer companies.

Forty-five minutes down the road, GM’s new, \$2 billion Spring Hill EV-manufacturing plant is constructing the facilities to build its first electric Cadillac. New assembly floors rise from what was once empty land, part of an already sprawling GM complex that has been in operation since the 1980s. Next door, another new Ultium Cells plant is also breaking ground, and the state is working with GM to move a road to accommodate it. In total, Rolfe estimates the state is providing \$65 million in incentives to support GM’s expansion here. “These are not inexpensive investments for the companies,” says Rolfe. “They’re not inexpensive for the state.”

Local governments' aggressive maneuvers to attract the electric-vehicle business have unsettled a well-established dynamic among the typical auto-industry power players. The UAW, the longtime counterweight to the auto companies, has had to fight to maintain its influence. Its current contracts remain intact, but its leverage is limited as automakers rethink their business and local communities vie to host them.

The abrupt shift presents a conundrum to labor leaders. Climate change and global market trends mean electric vehicles are the future. The transportation sector in the U.S. emits nearly 30% of global greenhouse-gas emissions, and nearly 60% of that comes from light-duty vehicles. The U.S. may be slow to change this equation, but the rest of the world—and the car market—is moving full speed ahead. For the UAW to fight EVs would be futile, and it's in the union's interest to ensure electric vehicles are made in the U.S. Yet those same market trends mean union membership is likely to take a hit.

A representative for the UAW national union declined to comment on the record for this story, and suggested he would “recalibrate [the UAW's] interest” in participating if TIME contacted local members. UAW later added that it could not speak on the record at the time because of an ongoing organizing campaign.

As it turns out, local union leaders and rank-and-file workers alike around the country said the transition to EVs has generated mixed feelings. In places like the Mahoning Valley, there is a cautious optimism that electric vehicles will bring prosperity, at least in the near term, even without organized labor. “They’re high-quality, high-paying jobs,” Franklin, the Warren mayor, says of the clean-energy ecosystem developing in his backyard. “Compared to what UAW members made in the past? We lost those jobs.”

But in places that have yet to be chosen as a new EV hub, workers are skeptical, nervous, even terrified. In Facebook groups and after-hours chats, workers say, views of the country's EV future are falling along the same partisan lines as so many other aspects of American life. Many conservatives doubt EVs even work, let alone represent an important part of the country's future. Democratic autoworkers accept the benefits of EVs, but worry that they might end up casualties of the industry's overhaul, no matter the rhetoric coming from Washington.

"Electric vehicles are the way of the future, it seems pretty obvious," says Justin Mayhugh, an auto-worker at GM's Fairfax Assembly Plant in Kansas City, Kans., and a UAW member. "But I'd be lying if I didn't say that I think most of us here in Kansas City are pretty concerned about the lack of investment *here*."

On May 18, Joe Biden traveled to Detroit to promote his infrastructure plan. Sitting in the driver's seat of a new electric Ford F-150 truck wearing his signature aviator sunglasses, Biden told the gathered reporters, "This sucker's quick," before accelerating off into an empty parking lot. Shortly after, Biden conceded that the future of electric vehicles in this country is uncertain, warning that the U.S. is at risk of falling behind China. Then he quickly pivoted back to his mantra. "When I think of the climate crisis," he said, "I think jobs."

This has been Biden's consistent talking point on climate change, from the campaign trail to the Oval Office. But the truth is that while the auto industry's transition may be inevitable, the myriad "good-paying union jobs with benefits" that Biden has promised will come with it remain a possibility, not a guarantee. And for better or worse, the federal government will play a key role determining whether that becomes a reality. "The United States is at a crossroads," says Trevor Higgins, senior director for domestic climate and energy at the Center for American Progress, a center-left think tank. "Where and how these

electric vehicles will be built is going to be determined by federal policy choices.”

The next few months may be decisive, as Congress decides the fate of Biden’s massive infrastructure package. Both the big-ticket spending items, such as the \$174 billion Biden has proposed to stimulate electric-vehicle adoption, as well the small print outlining the labor requirements for federal-funding beneficiaries, will shape the future of this new American industry—and workers’ place in it. So far, much is left to be desired. A bipartisan infrastructure deal struck in the Senate contains some \$7.5 billion in funding for EV-charging stations; a big sum, to be sure, but far short of what Biden proposed. Biden has also sought to use his presidential authority and convening power to shape the EV future: his Aug. 5 announcement included tightened vehicle standards that would incentivize the transition, as well as voluntary commitments from carmakers to go electric.

That’s the easy part. From there, the policy landscape gets more complicated, as Democrats try to infuse worker-friendly policies into other legislation that supports EVs. Democratic lawmakers have pushed legislation to revamp electric-vehicle tax -incentives so that cars would need to be assembled in the U.S. with union labor to qualify for a full tax rebate. Biden, widely viewed as the biggest union ally to occupy the White House in decades, has backed a measure that would make it easier for workers at fledgling EV companies—and businesses across the U.S.—to organize. “We have to get the President’s full agenda passed, so that we can get the best outcomes in the transition to EVs,” Liz Shuler, secretary-treasurer of the AFL-CIO, said at a July virtual event.

In the places that stand to gain and lose in these negotiations, people give the President’s performance managing the industry’s transformation mixed reviews. Many acknowledge that Biden’s electric-vehicle agenda will help their local community. But there is also

widespread understanding of what few in Washington want to admit: this transition is going to be messy. “When they say it’s creating all these new jobs, that’s a lie. I mean, you’re just shifting jobs from here to there,” says Dave Green, a GM assembly worker who previously led the local UAW branch in the Mahoning Valley. “I’m a little more hopeful with Joe Biden and Democrats in office, but at the same time, something’s got to give.”

Whatever Biden tries, it’s likely to run headlong into a wall of Republican opposition. Many in the GOP worry that supporting EVs will wreak havoc on the oil and gas industry, and cost millions of energy jobs in largely red states. It’s true, of course, that transitioning to electric vehicles will have downstream effects for oil and gas workers, gas-station owners, and a long list of other established industries. But clinging to the past is worse for everyone. The climate is changing, and jobs will need to too. The sooner we admit it, the better we can prepare. —*With reporting by Leslie Dickstein*