

UAW white paper on EV battery plants promotes union's corporatist "joint" safety programs

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In the run-up to the September 14 contract expiration for 150,000 Big Three autoworkers, the United Auto Workers leadership released a white paper on Monday on the Ultium electric vehicle battery cell plant in Lordstown, Ohio, a joint venture between General Motors and South Korea-based LG Energy Solution.

The intended audience of the UAW white paper, titled "High Risk & Low Pay," is not autoworkers but rather the auto companies and state officials to whom the UAW bureaucracy is attempting to sell its services as an adjunct of management.

In essence, the UAW is promising a more stable and disciplined low-paid workforce, seeking in return easier access to "organize" the EV battery plants, collect dues and expand the corporatist "joint" labor-management health and safety programs, which provide a lucrative source of additional income and privileges for union bureaucrats. Tellingly, at one point in the white paper, the UAW bemoans the high turnover at the Ultium plant, noting, "Some workers estimate annual turnover at the plant is running over 50 percent."

At the same time, the union bureaucracy is seeking even greater state backing than it has already received. While the UAW national leadership, in attempting to adopt a more "militant" posture, has withheld an early official endorsement of Biden's reelection run, it is seeking nothing more than firmer commitments by the administration to help bring in the UAW at the new EV plants.

The White House, for its part, is fully expecting to rely on the UAW apparatus to carry out its assigned role of overcoming and suppressing workers' opposition in the coming contract struggle and use it as a tool to impose massive new concessions. The expansion of the domestic EV industry on the basis of ultra-low wages is itself a critical element of Washington's plans to escalate trade conflict with China and prepare for war against it.

The UAW's "model solutions" to health and safety

The white paper cites the memorandum of agreement on health and safety from the current GM-UAW national contract, which proclaims itself an "excellent framework for the joint efforts in health and safety within General Motors. Since [1973], many potential hazards have been reduced or eliminated. The Local Joint Health and Safety Committees (LJHSCs) and Plant and Divisional Review Boards, provided for in the Memorandum of Understanding, are effective at resolving most health and safety concerns within plants."

In reality, the function of the UAW-corporate joint health and safety

bodies is to block disruptions to production by workers and ensure companies suffer no consequences from their disregard of safety, as demonstrated most starkly in the role of UAW bureaucracy in herding workers into COVID-infested plants during the pandemic, leading to the deaths of countless autoworkers.

Like the broader "joint" labor-management training programs which were initiated beginning in the 1980s—and which became the conduit for corporate bribery of union officials—the joint health and safety programs are based upon the false conception that the interests of the corporations and workers are fundamentally identical, and there is no conflict between profit-making and workers' health and livelihoods.

Meanwhile, while the report cites the poverty wages at Ultium Lordstown—starting wages are just \$16.25 an hour and top out at around \$20, \$12 below top pay for GM workers—it nowhere specifies what the UAW would consider an acceptable wage nor does it state any concrete demands in relation to benefits, working hours or other important issues. Contrary to the rhetoric of new UAW President Shawn Fain of a "just transition" to EVs, the UAW bureaucracy is in fact fully willing to agree to a lowering of autoworkers' wages and working conditions at the EV plants.

The UAW white paper cynically chastises GM for closing the Lordstown Assembly plant with the permanent loss of 5,000 jobs, citing its "devastating impact" on workers and the community. These are crocodile tears, as former Lordstown workers well know, given that the UAW agreed to the closure as part of the sellout 2019 GM contract.

In fact, the Big Three automakers hope to use Lordstown as a model, with thousands of higher paying jobs at traditional assembly and transmission plants to be eliminated and replaced with highly exploited, low-paid workers at the EV and battery plants.

In its conclusion the document states, "In a just transition to EVs, jobs in the battery plants that will power this transition must be as good or better than current jobs building internal combustion engine vehicles and components."

The wording is a rhetorical sleight of hand and highly significant. While workers building engines generally fall under the national Big Three contracts, the majority of auto parts workers labor under separate contracts, with vastly inferior pay, fewer benefits and brutal working conditions. The auto companies would be more than happy to see the sweatshop conditions that exist at UAW-"organized" components companies, such as Clarios, Dana and Forvia, extended to Big Three EV workers.

The auto companies are barely seeking to hide the attacks they are preparing not just on EV workers but to workers who build gas-powered vehicles as well. Auto executives and Wall Street view the upcoming contracts as "transformational" and the opportunity for a historic

restructuring of the industry, shifting the enormous costs of the transition to EV production onto the backs of autoworkers. This will take the form of both enormous job cuts—EVs require about 40 percent less labor to produce—and a sharp reduction in pay and benefits.

A memo issued by Ford regarding its planned battery plant in Marshall, Michigan, recently stated that pay for workers would be in the \$20 an hour range, including benefits, a poverty rate below the median income in the area. Ford has indicated that it will allow the UAW to organize the plant using an expedited procedure known as card check, suggesting it is confident the UAW will enforce the substandard pay rate.

This week *Bloomberg News* reported that Ford is throwing down the gauntlet, stating that the company will seek changes in contract language to make it easier to shift workers to plants that produce high demand models to boost production during the transition to EVs. Ford claims the current UAW contract restricts that ability. The provocative demand by Ford to create a new tier of migrant, “gig” autoworkers, uprooted and shifted from plant to plant at the whim of management, has dire implications for the rights and conditions of the entire working class, since “innovations” in auto negotiations historically have set broader precedents.

The demand for “flexibility” follows Ford getting a \$9.2 billion federal loan to help construct three new battery plants in Tennessee and Kentucky. The company has not explicitly agreed to voluntarily recognize the UAW at those plants. It is possible that Ford might insist on its demand for a migrant workforce as a condition for UAW recognition at the battery plants.

Significantly, the UAW white paper calls merely for such gargantuan corporate handouts to be spent “more wisely”—i.e., in ways which promote the institutional interests of the union apparatus.

Dangerous conditions at Ultium

Much of the UAW white paper deals with safety issues at Ultium Lordstown, which are clearly harrowing. Pointing to the highly dangerous nature of the production of lithium-ion batteries, the report notes, “A chemical called N-Methylpyrrolidone (NMP) is used to manufacture the cathode. Acute exposure may damage unborn children, cause respiratory tract irritation, skin irritation, nausea, headache, dizziness and diarrhea.

“In manufacturing the anode, the company uses a product called Lucon BT1003M. More than 95 percent of it consists of carbon nanotubes, which can cause germ cell mutations and cancer.”

In one incident, a worker was sprayed in the face by toxic electrolyte, a byproduct of battery production.

The worker reported, “After I was gassed, for a second, I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t say anything, I couldn’t tell the worker closest to me what had happened. I was groggy, dizzy. I had a hard time standing while we waited for security to arrive.”

In another incident a worker reported that toxic gas from waste dumped in an uncovered trash can forced the evacuation of a large area where quality inspectors worked. “When it happened, I had a headache and I was nauseous. I had the option to go home, but I knew they weren’t going to pay us. I chose to stay because I like my money. But a woman who was close to the can, she couldn’t stop vomiting. They came and got her in an ambulance. Her doctor wouldn’t let her come back. She was off for two weeks without pay. Another girl who got sent home, she didn’t get paid either.”

In contrast, the UAW white paper presents an absurd, fairy tale picture of conditions at the traditional automotive plants. It asserts, “The UAW-GM contract provides for participation in health and safety by workers or

their representatives at all levels of the company from the shop floor to the national level.” It further claims, “The union’s contract language provides for greater protection than that provided by agencies such as OSHA.”

The traditional Big Three plants: “There is no safety”

Asked about the UAW’s concern for health and safety, a veteran worker at the Stellantis Detroit Assembly Complex–Jefferson responded scathingly. She told the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*, “There is no safety. I am serious, it is bad. There is no ventilation,” she said referring to the recent heat wave. “We have no fans. I have a serious health issue. The things they do here, they don’t make sense.”

Workers at the Clarios battery plant in Holland, Ohio, members of the UAW, can attest to this as well. Exposure to lead in the plant is so great that workers must be tested for high levels of lead in their blood, which can cause long-term disabilities. Workers report that it is common for retirees to get cancer and die a few years after retirement.

One horrific workplace fatality after another takes place at UAW-“represented” plants. In 2021, Mark McKnight, a 57-year-old electrician at GM’s Marion Stamping Plant in Indiana, was crushed to death by a section of steel wall. “It just literally smashed him,” a worker reported to the *World Socialist Web Site*. “His head was smashed flat. There were bones everywhere. Blood was all over the floor. It was just horrible.”

In July 2022, Steven Dierkes, a 39-year-old worker at Caterpillar’s foundry in Mapleton, Illinois, died after falling into a crucible with molten metal, instantly incinerating him. “The first night back at the foundry,” a UAW worker at the plant told the *WSWS*, “higher level management was on the shop floor patrolling and asking questions about how employees felt about safety. All comments workers had about safety issues were ignored and responded to with excuses.”

In October 2022, Sam Hager, a 25-year-old worker at Ford’s Chicago Assembly Plant, died, with the plant’s medical response team taking over 20 minutes to arrive, workers said. “Management doesn’t care, they just want the line running,” a worker at the plant recounted. “The UAW also does nothing for us. Another woman had a seizure last year, her eyes were back in her head. They pulled her out of the line and started the line back. They didn’t even get her a stretcher. It’s just scary.”

Beyond these barbaric and needless workplace deaths, the result of corporate management’s relentless pursuit of profit, there is the daily, grinding toll which work in auto factories takes on workers’ bodies, with the UAW bureaucracy routinely agreeing to 12-hour shifts for six or seven days a week, as it has recently done at a number of Detroit-area Stellantis plants placed on “critical status.”

The fight to provide living wages to all autoworkers as well as secure jobs, pensions and a healthy and safe work environment cannot be left in the hands of the UAW apparatus, now headed by Shawn Fain, a longtime bureaucrat who has presided over countless sellouts.

As the statement of the Autoworkers Rank-and-File Committee Network on the 2023 contract battle spells out, “Autoworkers will win this fight, not through appeals to company executives and big business politicians, but by means of hard and uncompromising class struggle. The allies of workers are not in the corporate boardrooms or the halls of Congress, but rather among the millions of workers across the US and in other countries who are similarly looking to fight corporate exploitation, including the 350,000 UPS workers whose contract expires at the end of July.” The statement demands, “Rank-and-file control over line speed and production standards, to be negotiated by local rank-and-file committees, to ensure that workers’ health and safety comes first.”

The first step is to build and expand the network of rank-and-file committees at each auto plant. Workers interested in taking up this fight should contact the WSWS today.



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