

The Detroit News

Successful Auto Strike Shows Path Forward for Workers, Climate

By Dan Becker and Scott Hochberg
November 21, 2023.

The United Auto Workers is poised to finalize a key win for both workers' rights and the environment. While wage and cost of living increases received the most public attention, the union also won an overlooked but groundbreaking victory: protections for electric vehicle battery workers.

It's now up to President Biden to strengthen draft pollution rules to require that the automakers actually make the large numbers of EVs we need to avert climate catastrophe.

In recent years, the major automakers have greenwashed their way around producing EVs. They pledge to convert their entire fleets to EVs in the future and pay lip service to supporting the Environmental Protection Agency's emissions rules. Yet they trickle out few EVs while lobbying furiously [behind the scenes](#) to weaken those protections.

A handful of shiny Superbowl ads for electric vehicles distract from the harsh truth that automakers are doing everything they can to churn out profitable but polluting gas guzzlers while renegeing on their EV promises. For example, Ford [recently cut](#) \$12 billion in EV investments, including reducing Mustang Mach-E production and delaying plans for a Kentucky battery plant, while Honda and General Motors [scrapped](#) a \$5 billion joint effort to develop affordable EVs. Tesla, the world's [most valuable automaker](#), now [controls 50%](#) of domestic EV sales, compared with GM's 0.4% and Ford's 6.7%.

That's where the new contract comes in. Before the agreement, [some argued](#) that it takes fewer workers to assemble EVs than gas-powered vehicles so the UAW would see EVs as a threat to their workforce and side with management in fighting strong pollution rules.

But UAW President Shawn Fain [rejected that](#). "We have been told the EV future must be a race to the bottom. We called their bluff," he said. Now, EV battery plants — which the government has recently been [trying to bring to the U.S.](#) — will be [included](#) in the master contract that governs other UAW workers at the major automakers. It creates a beachhead that bolsters union efforts to organize previously unrepresented shops including Toyota, Nissan, VW, and [even](#)

[Tesla](#). And it gives the UAW a stake in the expanding market for clean EVs, which represent the biggest single step we can take to tackle the climate crisis.

The new UAW contract explodes the old canard that environmental and pro-worker goals must always be in tension. That's a good thing.

In the difficult fights ahead, unions and environmentalists need to join together to protect workers and the climate, and the strike has already [showcased](#) that solidarity. The new contract comes just as the EPA is setting standards that will determine how many EVs will be built in the coming years and how many EV jobs will be created.

The climate desperately needs electric vehicles. We just lived through the hottest [12 months](#) on record and the U.S. has experienced a [record number](#) of billion-dollar, climate-fueled disasters this year. Climate heating is happening [faster](#) than we thought it would.

EVs are critical to fighting climate change, because they emit no tailpipe pollution, reduce our dependence on oil, [save consumers billions at the pump](#), and require [less maintenance](#). Many EVs are [already less expensive to buy and run](#) than their gas-powered doppelclunkers.

And Americans want to buy EVs. Automakers sold 300,000 EVs last quarter, a nearly 50% increase over the same period last year. EVs comprise 7.9% of all new U.S. car sales, and in trend-setting California, [the number is much higher](#).

Unfortunately, we can't count on the automakers to produce the clean electric future we desperately need without requiring them to do so. Their record of lies, backsliding and backroom lobbying speaks for itself. Instead, the government's standards need to lead the way.

The administration's draft rules should be strengthened to require more EVs sooner and should close loopholes that weaken them. Stronger standards will create more secure jobs and enable America to take a commanding lead in this growing market currently dominated by China. We don't want to end up importing our EVs from China and exporting our jobs and profits there.

Dan Becker is the director of the [Center for Biological Diversity's Safe Climate Transport Campaign](#). Scott Hochberg is a transportation attorney at the Center's [Climate Law Institute](#).

<https://www.detroitnews.com/restricted/?return=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.detroitnews.com%2Fstory%2Fopinion%2F2023%2F11%2F20%2Fopinion-uaw-deal-shows-path-forward-for-workers-and-climate%2F71648368007%2F>