

October 30, 2023

President Joseph R. Biden, Jr.
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Biden:

As Black local elected leaders, we write to ask that you use the full powers of the presidency to support the workers' demands for fairness from the Big 3 US automakers and those in the expanding, increasingly southern-based industry to facilitate discussions between workers throughout the manufacturing process and industry leaders to enforce good jobs at existing global transplant facilities and in the budding Electric Vehicle (EV) sector throughout the country.

We applaud the UAW for reaching tentative agreements with the Big 3 automakers as well as your historic decision to walk the picket line with striking autoworkers. We also stand with workers who are attempting to organize with the UAW, the United Steelworkers (USW), the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), and others throughout this growing industry.

We particularly want to highlight the urgency revolving around the EV sector, fostered by your administration, where the tentative agreements with the Big 3 are in some ways the beginning, not the end, of the work. Black people are at the center of this fight, as workers who are demanding good jobs with a seat at the table at work, as consumers, people who will ride electric buses and buy electric cars, and as the communities hardest hit by environmental degradation.

By centering Black people in this fight, you have the ability not just to emulate one of our shared heroes, Franklin D. Roosevelt, but to correct the historic inequities that came from ultimately excluding many Black people from the New Deal.

Today, we have a chance to right the wrongs of the last century and more formally incorporate southern Black workers in democracy, starting at the place where they spend the bulk of their time...at work!

The Big 3 and other automakers are locating EV manufacturing plants, battery and other supply-line facilities in rural, Black communities in the South. They are doing this because they believe it will result in higher profits due to lower paying jobs and less worker power.¹

As of the last Census, the majority of Black people in the country live in the southern states². Moving jobs to the US South to exploit low labor costs built on a history of white supremacy is a pattern we have seen again and again. The current framework for labor-management relations, initiated by the New Deal, excludes many Black people from its full benefits. For instance, it excludes two sectors in which Black workers were overwhelmingly employed in the 1930s, farming and domestic labor, from protections

¹ See Jack Ewing, Battle Over Electric Vehicles Is Central to Auto Strike, *The New York Times*, Sep. 16, 2023

² See https://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/census_2000/cb01en176.html

enjoyed by others when forming a union. Both after Reconstruction and after the New Deal, southern states competed for industrial jobs without lifting Black people out of poverty. They accomplished this by disenfranchising Black and poor White citizens through a number of restrictions on voting, truancy laws which allowed the use of free Black labor, and by passing so-called “right-to-work” laws to lure businesses to the region. As then-Senator John F. Kennedy noted in the 1950s, the southern representatives succeeded in luring much of the textile industry from unionized New England to the South where the jobs paid less and it was harder to form a union.³ And yet, Black activists have not let that stop them from trying.⁴ It is imperative that we do not leave them hanging.

You can break this cycle, Mr. President. And in the process, you would be expanding democratic participation to millions of Americans.

By leveraging the power of federal funds currently fast-tracking industry growth in chorus with the power of auto workers—both those negotiating with the Big 3 and others organizing for the first time throughout the expansive network of global transplant and electric vehicle parts and assembly facilities, you can help right the wrongs of the last century. **All we ask is that you mediate a series of conversations between workers, their unions and automakers to design procedures to enforce the mandate for good jobs you have already articulated⁵ and to further negotiate standards for job quality through on-going worker engagement as the industry evolves, including but not limited to standards of compensation, healthy practices, and ensure the quality of all vehicles such that those making, operating and eventually riding on them remain safe.**

Your administration is putting a significant amount of money into electric vehicle production and procurement, a decision that will modernize our public transit systems, public utilities, public school vehicles, and more.⁶ As local elected leaders, we seek to align our own resources with federal investments in an effort to create good jobs for Black workers in our community and throughout the country. Alone, the buying power of our individual cities does not get workers to the table. But together, your Administration could help us maximize our ability to expand democracy at work for millions of Americans.

As president, you have taken a leading role in mitigating the harms of climate change, including championing the bills that are now leading to the creation of an entire industry for sustainable energy. As Black local elected leaders, we recognize that Black people live in communities that have been disproportionately impacted by harms the government and private industry have inflicted on the environment⁷ and climate change overall.⁸ In order for your policies to have lasting effects, it is important that you work with us to center Black workers and the communities in which they live, not setting industry standards without them at the table.

³ See John F. Kennedy, New England and The South, *The Atlantic*, January 1954, available at <https://cdn.theatlantic.com/media/archives/1954/01/193-1/132440572.pdf>.

⁴ See Mary-Elizabeth B. Murray, African Americans in the Great Depression and New Deal, *Oxford Research Encyclopedia*, Nov. 19, 2020 & Joseph Szczesny, League of Revolutionary Black Workers Forced Change in the Auto Industry, UAW, *The Detroit Bureau*, Feb. 8, 2022.

⁵ See U.S. Department of Energy, Biden-Harris Administration Announces \$15.5 Billion to Support a Strong and Just Transition to Electric Vehicles, Retooling Existing Plants, and Rehiring Existing Workers, Aug. 31, 2023, available at [https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/biden-says-auto-workers-need-good-jobs-that-can-support-a-family-as-carmakers-transition-to-electric-vehicles](https://www.energy.gov/articles/biden-harris-administration-announces-155-billion-support-strong-and-just-transition#:~:text=WASHINGTON%2C%20D.C.%20%E2%80%94%20As%20part%20of,a%20just%20transition%20to%20EVs; see also, Josh Boak, Biden says auto workers need ‘good jobs that can support a family’ as carmakers transition to electric vehicles, Associated Press, Aug. 14, 2023, available at <a href=).

⁶ See Andrew J. Hawkins, Here come the electric buses, *The Verge*, June 26, 2023, available at <https://www.theverge.com/2023/6/26/23771167/bus-zero-emission-electric-usdot-fta-biden-buttigieg>.

⁷ See Linda Villarosa, Pollution Is Killing Black Americans. This Community Fought Back, *The New York Times Magazine*, July 28, 2020.

⁸ EPA, Climate Change and Social Vulnerability in the United States: A Focus on Six Impacts, Environmental Protection Agency, 2021, available at https://www.epa.gov/system/files/documents/2021-09/climate-vulnerability_september-2021_508.pdf.

We stand with you and all workers of the industry—current and future union members—in this historic effort to actualize the promises of Reconstruction and incorporate millions of people into a multiracial democracy, both in civil society and at work. Our generation may never see another opportunity to super-charge the country towards a healthier democracy.⁹

We believe that you can turn the tide on long standing racial inequality while simultaneously catalyzing an era of vast climate adaptation—all by using the full power of the presidency to facilitate negotiations between the expanding automotive and electric vehicle industry and workers who will make the vehicles of the future possible.

Sincerely,

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Vice Mayor Willie German Jr., City of Muskegon, MI

⁹ See Nate Cohn, Consistent Signs of Erosion in Black and Hispanic Support for Biden, *The New York Times*, Sep. 5, 2023.

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