A Once-Defiant U.A.W. Local Now Focuses on G.M.’s Success

By NICK BUNKLEY

LORDSTOWN, Ohio — For the better part of three decades, the car plant here was a seemingly endless source of trouble for General Motors.

In the 1970s, the factory’s 7,000 workers were so bitter toward management that thousands of Chevrolet Vegas rolled off the assembly line with slit upholstery and other damage. The hostility eventually led to a 22-day strike in 1972 that cost G.M. $150 million, and the term “Lordstown syndrome” became shorthand to describe rebellious American factory workers.

Even when no intentional sabotage occurred, many Lordstown-built vehicles were of poor quality. G.M. had planned to abandon Lordstown, the site of many wildcat strikes, by 2002.

But the plant survived, though dozens of other auto factories did not, and today it is preparing to build a new compact car, the Chevrolet Cruze, that is integral to G.M.’s hopes of becoming a successful company again.

United Automobile Workers’ leaders in Lordstown, Detroit and other cities where clashes with management were once common said they have since decided that their only chance to survive in a global economy is to work with, not against, their employers.

Though many people blame the union for dragging down the Detroit automakers, the companies’ struggles have turned the U.A.W. into one of their strongest allies.

In the process, a new tone of cooperation has emerged at Lordstown.

“We were the bad dog on the street at one time,” said Ben Strickland, shop chairman for the U.A.W. chapter in Lordstown, Local 1112. “We’ve got 3,000 lives to worry about. The cockiness and the arrogance that we once portrayed — we definitely got a lot more humble.”

In the 1980s, members of Local 1112 were so opposed to concessions that they picketed their own union hall. But in 2008, G.M. had little trouble persuading them to approve a competitive operating agreement that reduced the number of job classifications and allowed some work to be outsourced, provisions that typically cause considerable opposition.

Last May, when G.M. was lumbering toward bankruptcy and asked workers for hundreds of millions of dollars in labor concessions, 84 percent in Local 1112 voted for the deal.
To be sure, workers are grateful to still be earning paychecks in a part of Ohio that has lost nearly 300,000 manufacturing jobs since 2000. But the economy was terrible in this blue-collar area more than 25 years ago, too.

Union leaders say an antagonistic relationship simply does not benefit either side anymore.

“Everyone has come to a realization that management is not the enemy, and the union is not the enemy,” Jim Graham, president of Local 1112, said.

“The enemy is the foreign competition,” he added. “We’re working much, much better with management than we ever have. There's still problems, but we sit down and work those out.”

The number of grievances filed against G.M. by Local 1112 members has declined 90 percent from the plant’s most hostile days in the 1970s, when as many as 15,000 were filed in a year, he said.

Problems with absenteeism and many workers’ compensation claims have long been resolved, and Lordstown has become one of G.M.’s most productive and efficient plants.

The plant started 2008 with two shifts and gained a third when high gas prices increased demand for smaller cars like the Chevrolet Cobalt it now builds. It was reduced to two shifts in January and one in April as G.M. neared bankruptcy.

The second shift was called back in the fall, and Local 1112 officials hope for the third shift to return in mid-2010, when Cruze production begins.

Meanwhile, all U.A.W. members have given up raises and bonuses and made other sacrifices that would have been unthinkable in 1972. A cost-saving provision of the 2007 contract meant that temporary and newly hired employees for jobs on the third shift earned half as much as others, despite doing similar work.

G.M. also needs the plant workers to help make the Cruze a success by ensuring high quality. “There’s a lot of pressure on the workers there because the Cruze is being portrayed as the savior of General Motors,” said John Russo, director of the Center for Working-Class Studies at nearby Youngstown State University. “There’s a lot riding on it, and the workers and the community feel it.”

Mike Ramsey, 51, who transferred recently to Lordstown from a New Jersey plant that has closed, said he saw plenty of apprehension in the plant but little ill will toward G.M.

To keep his job, Mr. Ramsey has to spend weekdays apart from his home and family 400 miles away in Philadelphia, but he said he still arrives each day hoping to help G.M. thrive again.

“Your main focus is to keep a job and work toward a pension,” said Mr. Ramsey, who drives a forklift and has worked at G.M. for 25 years. “I don’t think that animosity is there anymore. We all realize we have to do our part to keep the company going.”

The 3,000 people who now work at G.M.’s Lordstown complex, which opened in 1966 and includes an adjacent fabricating plant represented by Local 1714, is about a quarter of the work force at its peak in 1987.
Many longtime workers are glad their days are more peaceful and said it was their responsibility to accept sacrifices the company needed them to make.

“They haven’t asked too much from us yet,” said Diane Hoops, who has worked at Lordstown for 30 years and whose husband retired from the plant. The constant battles of years past “made it hard to come to work every day,” said Mrs. Hoops, who wants to work at least five more years to provide for her four children at home. “It’s mellowed out.”

A return to an era of belligerence and brinksmanship is unlikely, said Mr. Strickland, the shop chairman, because job security, a given when Detroit dominated the industry, is now workers’ biggest concern.

“When General Motors had such a big percentage of the market, our fears weren’t there,” Mr. Strickland said. “There wasn’t a trump card that we didn’t pull.”

“Now you’ve got to be careful about pulling those trump cards out because it could be your last. We want G.M. to be successful. We want the U.A.W. to be successful. Making that happen on both sides, that creates security.”