

Unions Fight in the States to Make Biden's Climate Agenda Work for Workers

Labor leaders worry that some federal incentives for renewable energy do not come with strict standards on pay. In Maine, they added their own.

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The indoor wave pool and wind tunnel facility at the University of Maine. Gov. Janet Mills signed a law that seeks to jump-start an offshore wind industry that has been in the works for more than a decade. Mason Trinca for The New York Times



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Reporting from Augusta, Maine

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President Biden's labor and environmental goals are colliding in the auto industry, where concerns over the electric vehicle transition [underpin an autoworkers strike](#). But in states like Maine, unions and environmental groups have teamed up in an attempt to make a central promise of the president's green agenda come true for workers.

Mr. Biden has a favorite phrase when talking about the expansive climate bill he [signed into law last year](#): "When I think climate — not a joke — I think jobs," he said last month at the White House. "When I say climate means jobs, I mean good-paying union jobs."

That has not yet been the case for Mr. Biden's agenda. The White House estimates that three bills Mr. Biden signed into law — the infrastructure bill, the CHIPS Act and the Inflation Reduction Act — have spurred more than \$500 billion in planned investments in low-emission energy and advanced manufacturing that will eventually lead to thousands of new jobs. But much of that [has flowed to conservative states](#) like Tennessee and South Carolina — which have relatively [low levels of union membership](#) — partly because labor is less expensive there than in heavily unionized states like Michigan.

Policymakers in Maine are trying to change that trend with a new law that seeks to make the state a more attractive destination for clean-energy investment — and to ensure those investments create new union jobs. Their efforts center on the development and deployment of offshore wind power, a sector that, like electric vehicles, is crucial to Mr. Biden's economic and emissions goals.

Gov. Janet Mills of Maine, a Democrat, recently signed a law that seeks to jump-start an offshore wind industry that has been in the works for more than a decade, while trying to boost unionization of the sector. The law attaches its procurement spending to new labor standards for what officials hope will be thousands of new wind-energy workers, including wage minimums and requirements meant to boost the odds that jobs will go to union members.

Much of the investments spurred by the trio of bills President Biden signed into law last year have flowed to states with low levels of union membership. Desiree Rios for The New York Times

Some of the spending that Mr. Biden has approved carries similar requirements aimed at helping unions and boosting wages. But much of it does not, including vast tax credits for clean energy created by the Inflation Reduction Act.

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Union leaders are hoping Maine's law — and those like it in other liberal states — help fulfill Mr. Biden's "union jobs" promise for his climate spending.

"Maine paints a picture of what can be done anywhere," said Matt Schlobohm, the executive director of the Maine A.F.L.-C.I.O. labor union.

Maine has received federal funding from several of Mr. Biden's economic laws, but no new private investments in electric vehicles or other low-emission energy manufacturing projects, according to Biden administration statistics. To help attract that money, Ms. Mills pushed bills earlier this year to speed the manufacturing of offshore turbines at a so-called wind port and guarantee the purchase of the electricity that those turbines will eventually generate.

A coalition of union leaders and environmental groups pushed the governor to go further and include wage floors, training standards and other measures meant to help workers and unions in offshore wind projects.

The group's leaders included Jason J. Shedlock, the president of the Maine State Building and Construction Trades Council. At one point, he told the governor's staff that if she did not agree to labor-friendly provisions in the bill, he would lead a coordinated union effort urging the Biden administration to deny the state new funding for infrastructure, clean energy and other projects.

Ms. Mills [vetoed an early version](#) of the wind bill over its labor provisions — specifically, a requirement that construction and manufacturing projects in the state be governed by a form of collective bargaining known as project labor agreements.

But Mr. Shedlock and his allies, including top environmental groups across the state, rewrote the bill and cut a deal with Ms. Mills in the dying days of the state's legislative session.

The deal environmental and labor groups cut with Maine's governor paves the way for a wind port manufacturing facility to be built on the Maine coast. Mason Trinca for The New York Times

"We knew that Maine had an opportunity to be a national leader in this industry," Mr. Shedlock said recently. "We also knew that if we didn't insist on strong labor standards, that industry would be sold to the lowest bidder."

White House officials insist that Mr. Biden's agenda will lead to the significant creation of union manufacturing jobs, citing examples like a Ford Motor announcement that it will add 6,200 union jobs across the Midwest as part of its electric vehicle strategy.

Alex Jacquez, Mr. Biden's special assistant for economic development and industrial strategy, said in an interview that the administration was committed to "ensuring that the federal funding that we put out is incentivizing applicants and recipients who prioritize those strong labor standards and prioritize good-paying union jobs."

But not all incentives come with those strings, particularly the Inflation Reduction Act. The nonprofit group [Good Jobs First estimates](#) that five newly announced battery plants that pay relatively low wages will collectively reap millions of dollars in subsidies from that law.

If those trends calcify, union leaders worry they will spend years or decades fighting to organize workers in a new industry — which would be more difficult than creating a heavily unionized one from scratch.

"There's nothing about a clean energy job that makes it a good job," said Francis Eanes, executive director of the Maine Labor Climate Council. "We have to make that true upfront."

Unions and environmental groups have increasingly worked together in recent years to pass laws in states like Illinois, California and New York that pair renewable-energy goals with high-wage and other labor standards for the work.

The risk to states is that companies become spooked by strict labor laws and take their climate tax credits elsewhere — or invest less in renewables than they otherwise would. There is also a risk that strong wage and labor standards could push up the price of renewable projects, including wind, which is already [facing mounting cost pressures](#) in the United States and globally.

For labor and environmental groups, the effort has been both unifying and challenging.

"We're not talking about things like whether an offshore wind port is necessary. We're talking about what are the labor standards that we're going to use when we build that port?" said Kathleen Meil, senior director of policy and partnerships at the nonprofit Maine Conservation Voters. "That is a trickier conversation."

Environmental and labor groups carried their conversation with Ms. Mills and her staff deep into July this summer. At one point, Mr. Shedlock delivered a proposal to the governor's team and refused to leave until it had shared the proposal with her and responded to him.

The deal they cut, signed in late July, paves the way for a wind port manufacturing facility to be built on the Maine coast. It commits the state to a goal of procuring 3 gigawatts of offshore wind energy by 2040.

Dan Burgess, who directs Ms. Mills's energy office, said the commitment "helps give that signal and that certainty to the market that we're moving forward with this."

The spending is attached to new wage minimums and other labor standards for the workers who build, assemble and install those turbines. There are training mandates for those workers and a requirement that if nonunion contractors win state construction bids, they have to fill any unexpected job openings with union labor.

Mr. Biden celebrated it on a trip to Maine shortly after it was passed.

"It is a big, big deal," he said. The bill, he added, "will create good-paying union jobs."

Jim Tankersley is a White House correspondent with a focus on economic policy. He has written for more than a decade in Washington about the decline of opportunity for American workers, and is the author of "The Riches of This Land: The Untold, True Story of America's Middle Class." [More about Jim Tankersley](#)

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