

Workers reject McCain overture

By Andrew Ward
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LORDSTOWN, OH -- Three hours after John McCain's campaign bus left General Motors' plant in Lordstown, Ohio, workers started streaming in and out of the factory's gates for the mid-afternoon shift change.

Only a fraction had caught a glimpse of the Republican presidential candidate when he toured the production line and still fewer attended the meeting he held in an adjacent conference room. "Management invited him," said 38-year-old Tim Niles. "It had nothing to do with us. We're with Obama."

Mr Niles, a white, working-class Democrat who wears a "Bubba's Army" T-shirt, is exactly the kind of voter Mr McCain was courting on his trip to northern Ohio on Friday. On the day Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton staged their first joint rally, Mr McCain was trying to undermine their reconciliation by wooing Mrs Clinton's blue-collar base.

His efforts appeared wasted on many. "We're a working-class factory," said 49-year-old Greg George. "McCain calls himself moderate, but his party has been a disaster for working people over the past eight years."

For every person who pledged loyalty to Mr Obama, however, there were two or more who refused to comment. Many could have been McCain backers – recent polls showed him winning a quarter of former Clinton supporters in Ohio.

Jim Pearson, 58, was one of the few willing to voice support for Mr McCain. "The UAW [the United Auto Workers' Union, which endorsed Mr Obama] doesn't speak for me," he said. "McCain has the experience. Obama doesn't."

Attracting "Reagan Democrats" – white, working-class voters who switched party to support Ronald Reagan in the 1980s – is an important part of the McCain strategy. He hopes to appeal by focusing on national security and exploiting doubts about Mr Obama's experience and values. If he could win Ohio and Pennsylvania – two big, mostly white, working-class swing states – he would have a foot in the Oval Office. But the latest polls show him trailing Mr Obama, both in those states and nationally.

In his meeting with about 100 GM workers, Mr McCain burnished his bipartisan credentials by promising "to put the country first over party". He acknowledged that "America is hurting" but insisted government bail-outs for failing industries and barriers to foreign trade would only worsen the economy. "That was the case in the 1930s," he said. "Our protectionism and isolationism led from a recession to a deep depression."

Lordstown is in Trumbull County, an industrial area where John Kerry, the 2004 Democratic nominee, beat George W. Bush by 24 points, in spite of losing the state. It has suffered an exodus of manufacturing jobs, particularly in the steel industry, but the GM plant is a rare bright spot. It produces two of the smallest models in the GM range – the Chevrolet Cobalt and Pontiac G5 – at a time when soaring fuel prices are forcing Americans away from larger vehicles. GM plans to add a third daily shift, increasing the plant's workforce by 1,400, to cope with surging demand.

While Lordstown is prospering, GM announced plans this month to close its facility near Dayton, where it builds sports utility vehicles, with the loss of 2,500 jobs.

Mr McCain also used his visit to tout plans to break US dependence on foreign oil by increasing domestic drilling, expanding nuclear power and investing in alternative energy – including a \$300m (€190m, £150m) government prize to reward electric car technology.