Longer weeks in US auto plants for a slightly smaller market

October 2026 data on sales, hours, payrolls, tariffs, hybrids and recalls at US auto assembly plants, for industrial engineering and continuous improvement leaders at automakers.

46.0 hrs
AUTO PRODUCTION WORKWEEK, OCTOBER 2026 [3]

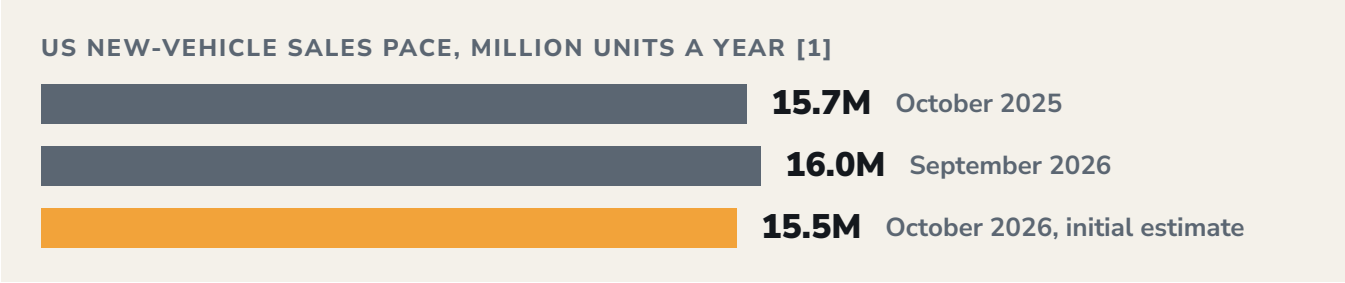
$3B
HONDA'S NEW OHIO HYBRID PLANT, NOV 2026 [7]

23.5M
US VEHICLES RECALLED, FIRST HALF 2026 [10]

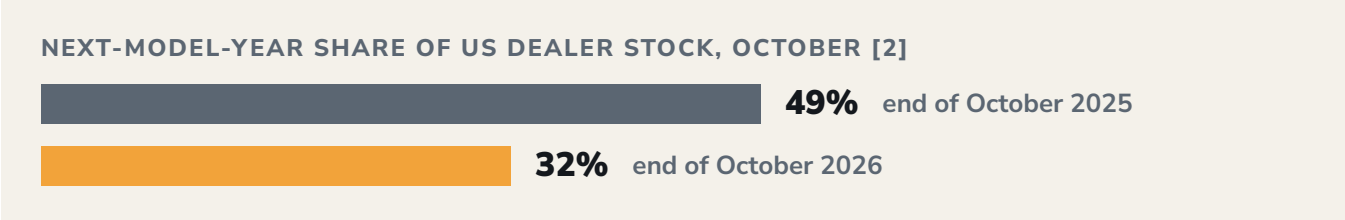
US new-vehicle sales are down about 1.5% in 2026, yet production workers in motor vehicles and parts averaged 46.0 hours a week in October 2026, up from 42.8 [1][3]. To us this suggests existing lines are absorbing more hours and variety than their standards were written for.

A market that is not growing

Cox Automotive put the US new-vehicle sales pace for October 2026 at an initial 15.5 million annualized, down from 16.0 million in September and 15.7 million in October 2025, the slowest pace since January. Year-to-date sales are down about 1.5% against 2025 [1]. October volume was 1.324 million, up 2.9% on a year earlier [1].



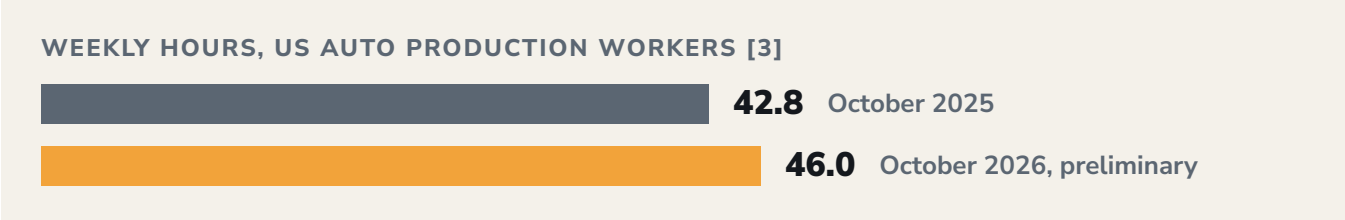
US new-vehicle inventory ended October 2026 at 2.92 million units, 2.9% below a year earlier, with 87 days' supply against roughly 90 [2]. Model-year 2027 vehicles were 32% of stock, where the next model year was 49% a year earlier [2]. In September 2026 Cox Automotive said manufacturers appear to be limiting new-model production and putting profitability ahead of volume [5].



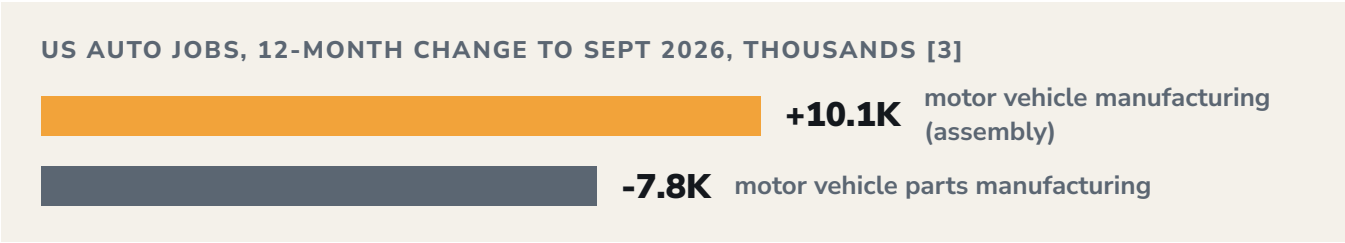
We think the model-year changeover is running later and slower than last year, so plants are building the outgoing model year for longer. Through September 2026, fleet sales were up 7% while retail sales to consumers were down 5% [5]. Cox Automotive raised its full-year forecast to 16.1 million from 15.8 million, with downside risk now higher [1][5].

More hours, more assembly jobs

BLS preliminary data for October 2026 show production workers in US motor vehicles and parts averaging 46.0 hours a week, seasonally adjusted, against 42.8 in October 2025 [3]. Our arithmetic puts that at 3.2 more hours, about 7.5% more per worker. Average hourly earnings were $34.76, up $2.21 over twelve months [3].



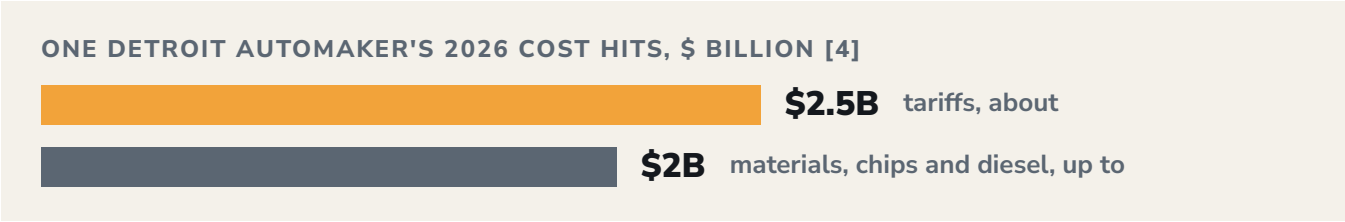
In September 2026, production workers in motor vehicle manufacturing, the assembly side of the industry, averaged 48.3 hours a week, 3.8 more than a year earlier [3]. Our arithmetic implies about 44.5 hours then. Assembly employment was 298,800, up 10,100 over twelve months, while motor vehicle parts employment was 514,000, down 7,800 [3].



We read this as assembly plants adding both people and hours in a year when the market did not grow, while parts plants shed jobs. More people on longer weeks means more shifts, more overtime and more stations running outside the week their standards assumed.

Tariffs and relocated product

NPR reported on October 29, 2026 that one Detroit automaker put its 2026 tariff cost at about $2.5 billion, lower than it had forecast earlier and partly offset by refunds. It said materials, including computer chips, and diesel could cost up to $2 billion this year [4]. Another Detroit automaker expects commodities, memory chips and logistics to be a headwind of about $2 billion year over year [4].

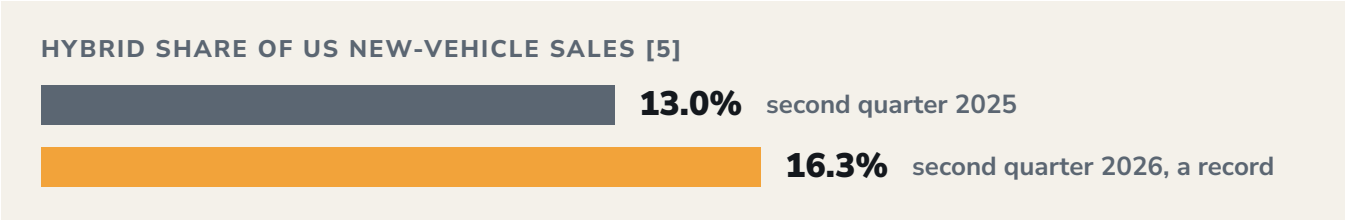


Steel, aluminum and copper imports have carried added tariffs since 2025, and Kelley Blue Book put the average new-vehicle transaction price at just over $50,000 in September 2026, close to a record [4]. Toyota said in July 2026 it will spend $3.6 billion over four years to move Tacoma production from Tijuana, Mexico to San Antonio, Texas, with a new assembly line in a standalone building [9]. Honda announced $3 billion on November 9, 2026 for a central Ohio plant with capacity for 240,000 vehicles a year, due in 2029 [7].

Our take is that tariffs pull volume into US plants over several years, and until the new capacity opens, the existing lines absorb the extra hours, variants and relocated product.

Hybrids on combustion lines

Hybrid share of US new-vehicle sales reached a record 16.3% in the second quarter of 2026, up from 13.0% a year earlier, with hybrid volume up 23% [5]. US EV sales were 262,649 in the third quarter of 2026, down 39.5% from the record third quarter of 2025 and about 6.4% of new-vehicle sales. Electrified vehicles, including hybrids and plug-in hybrids, were nearly 25% [6].

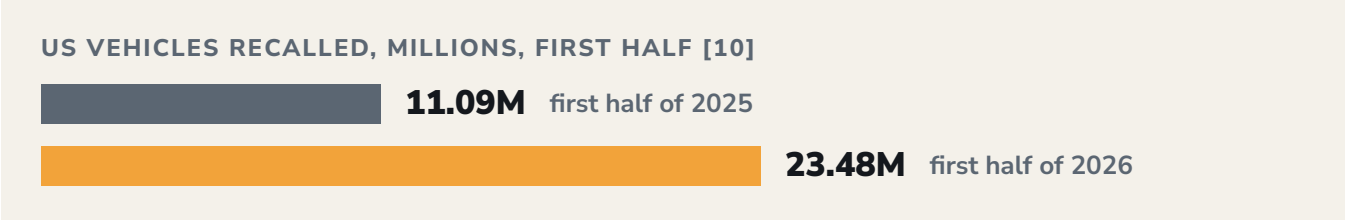


Mobility Global expects North American assembly of full hybrids to pass 3 million units in 2027, up 25% a year, and reach nearly one-third of light-vehicle assembly by 2030 [11]. Honda says its investments raise Ohio hybrid capacity by 250% and it is retooling an Ohio transmission plant for two hybrid systems [7]. GM plans $1.25 billion to ready its Lansing Delta Township assembly plant for hybrid production [8].

Murphy Automotive Product Pipeline (September 2026) counts more than $70 billion in EV write-downs and program cancellations. It calls model years 2026 to 2028 a three-year product gap, with new product returning late in calendar 2028 [12]. Our guess is that hybrids are being added to lines that already run combustion models, so station content and line balance change with no new platform to reset them.

Fewer recalls, far more vehicles

Sedgwick, using NHTSA data, counted 431 US recalls in the first half of 2026, down 6.5% from 461 a year earlier and the lowest six-month total in six years. The vehicles covered rose 111.6% to 23.48 million from 11.09 million, the highest half-year total in five years [10].



Electrical systems led all categories with 74 recalls and 6.23 million vehicles, the most in a decade. Back-over prevention systems were second by volume at 3.01 million vehicles, and powertrain was third with 23 recalls covering 2.44 million [10]. Our arithmetic gives about 54,500 vehicles per recall in the first half of 2026, against about 24,100 a year earlier. We infer that fewer recalls reaching far more vehicles is what high-volume shared components and long model runs produce when a defect escapes.

1 second

An illustrative calculation, ours and not from any source. A final assembly line with a 60-second takt builds 60 vehicles an hour. If average cycle drifts by one second, it builds 59.02. Over two 8-hour shifts and 235 production days, that is about 3,698 vehicles a year.

Five questions we would ask

1. Sales are down about 1.5% year to date while production workers average 46.0 hours a week [1][3]. When was each line's takt and time standard last confirmed against the hours it actually runs?

2 Assembly production workers averaged 48.3 hours a week in September 2026, 3.8 more than a year earlier [3]. Which stations absorb the extra hours, and do their standard work and ergonomic assessments assume that week?

3 Model-year 2027 vehicles were 32% of inventory at the end of October 2026, against 49% a year earlier [2]. How long will the outgoing model year run on your lines, and how many engineering changes has it absorbed?

4 Hybrid share reached 16.3% in the second quarter of 2026 [5]. What happens to station content and line balance when hybrid mix moves ten points on a line that also builds combustion models?

5 Tariff-driven moves such as Tacoma and new hybrid capacity put more product into US plants [7][9]. Is the method and time data for those variants ready before launch, and who keeps it current?

Sources

[1] Cox Automotive, Cox Automotive Forecast: October New-Vehicle Sales Hold Steady Despite Lower Consumer Sentiment, Higher Borrowing Costs (October 27, 2026, updated November 5, 2026)

[2] Cox Automotive, New-Vehicle Inventory Builds Again in October as Listing Prices Top $50,000 (November 12, 2026)

[3] US Bureau of Labor Statistics, Industries at a Glance: Automotive Industry, data through October 2026 (extracted November 13, 2026)

[4] NPR, Tariffs, diesel and computer chips are driving up costs for automakers (October 29, 2026)

[5] Cox Automotive, Q3 2026 Cox Automotive Sales Forecast Update, presentation transcript (September 2026)

[6] Cox Automotive, EV Sales in the U.S. Continue to Rise: Q3 2026 Hits Highest Volume in a Year (October 12, 2026)

[7] Manufacturing Dive, Honda to invest $3B in new Ohio hybrid vehicle plant (November 10, 2026)

[8] TechCrunch, GM is embracing hybrids now (October 27, 2026)

[9] Industrial Info Resources, Toyota: $3.6 Billion to Shift Some Automotive Production to U.S. from Mexico (July 10, 2026)

[10] Autobody News, Vehicle Electrical Systems Led All Categories in U.S. Auto Recalls in First Half of 2026, on Sedgwick's H1 2026 US Product Safety and Recall Index (September 2, 2026)

[11] DBusiness, Forecast: U.S. Vehicle Sales Unlikely to Regain Pre-pandemic Levels This Decade, on Mobility Global's forecast (September 29, 2026)

[12] CDG News, Product pipeline report: 3 trends shaping auto retail's next 5 years, on the Murphy Automotive Product Pipeline (September 20, 2026)

Research by Retrocausal, November 2026. Free to read and share. Statements marked as our reading are inferences, and the calculation in the dark box is illustrative.