

US: 2,600 strike Volvo Trucks in Dublin, Virginia

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More than 2,600 workers at Volvo Trucks North America in Dublin, Virginia, are in their second week of a strike over unfair labor practices. Striking workers at the New River Valley assembly plant are represented by United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 2069. While both the Volvo and the UAW have declined to state the specific reasons for the strike, workers told *World Socialist Web Site* reporters that healthcare, safety and job security were their main concerns.

The strike began February 1 after Volvo refused to renew the current contract, presumably in an effort to force the “industry standard” of cutbacks seen at the Big Three automakers onto its own workforce. The UAW called the walkout after a 95 percent vote for strike action by the membership.

Despite the clear determination of workers at the plant to fight for their living conditions, the UAW leadership has already signified their willingness to cave in to the company’s demands. Local UAW President Lester Hancock stated, “The only thing that would have to happen is for the company to make a phone call and say they’re willing to negotiate. We’re not going to keep our members out of work any longer than we have to.” In other words, the UAW would be willing to end the strike before negotiations had even begun.

Despite the similarity of the conditions facing the Volvo workers to those of other autoworkers, no effort has been made by the UAW leadership to link their strike to the struggles of workers at the Big Three autoworkers at Ford, Chrysler and General Motors. The union leadership has not even sought to spread the strike to the other Volvo plants in Hagerstown, Maryland, and Allentown, Pennsylvania. The strike is not mentioned on the UAW web site.

Speaking to the WSW, many workers expressed

concern over the possibility of layoffs at the plant. In early 2007, about 900 of 3,170 jobs were cut, with Volvo rehiring 580 workers in late 2007. Volvo then announced late last year that 650 employees would be terminated in February 2008. But Local President Hancock said that this wasn’t the reason for the strike, as the union realizes “the whole trucking industry” is in a downturn, according to the *Roanoke Times*. “It’s everywhere,” he said. “It’s not just Volvo.”

Workers pointed out that the decision not to renew the contract is well timed for Volvo. In a move to combat low truck sales, the company had intended to schedule repairs and updates on different parts of the production lines. Conveniently, with workers on strike, the repairs can be done in the meantime without having to pay the workforce any unemployment compensation.

The plant employs workers from all over southwest Virginia, as well as West Virginia, and even North Carolina. Many have nearly an hour-long commute, with some driving even two hours because the plant offers some of the highest paying jobs in the region. One worker commented that homes near the factory could be \$30,000 higher than a similar home 50 miles away, just because of the location. In addition to being a critical part of the region’s economy, the New River Valley Plant is the sole Volvo facility responsible for final production of trucks in the entire North American region, as well as all highway trucks sold by Mack Trucks in North America. (Mack Trucks is now a subsidiary of Volvo.)

In 2006, the Volvo plant produced roughly 50,000 trucks for the North American region. Workers cite that the retail value of the trucks averaged \$100,000, with some models, such as the “Cowboy” model with an extended nose and cab, selling for upwards of \$200,000.

There was a harsh decline in truck sales in 2007, with production being cut by nearly 50 percent. A new emissions law caused truck prices to rise with the addition of a catalytic converter along with other parts. Truckers and fleets looking to purchase vehicles bought heavily in 2006 prior to the price increase. The bleak economic situation has caused a further decline in truck purchases, as major industries such as housing and manufacturing tie in strongly to truck transport. The chief concerns voiced by strikers were job security and healthcare stability. Many workers expressed frustration over Volvo's continued setbacks, and feared the company will try to "negotiate" workers into accepting a contract modeled after those at the Big Three, now considered the industry standard. Over the past year, Chrysler, GM and Ford have pushed through contracts setting back the conditions of autoworkers by decades. Newly hired workers now make about half the standard wage, while healthcare has been passed off to the UAW bureaucracy. The healthcare fund to be administered by the UAW—the Voluntary Employees Beneficiary Association, or VEBA—is already short by billions, threatening further cuts. The Big Three have already announced tens of thousands of layoffs in the wake of the new contract deals.

Striker Frank Bottemly said, "They really abused our healthcare at each contract. They're looking at the Big Three for healthcare, that's the industry standard. That's why we were worried, because we saw what they've done at the Big Three and we know that's what they're going after."

"They probably figure we're not going to stay out here that long, but most of us were ready for it. Most of us had money saved, we've got our taxes coming back; we're ready to stand up for what we think is right."

"And if we don't, soon they'll be taking away something else. It's just not right. We have to look out for our kids, because they might want to work here some day, and there's really nothing else around here."

Frank added that Volvo is "very hard to work with. There's a lot of tension. I think the management kind of looks down on us, and wants to use us as a scapegoat whenever anything goes wrong."

Walter Spangler said, "The workers in the plant are just being jerked around so much," adding, "We don't have medical care in the US worth a penny." He expressed fear that a major health problem could create a personal crisis, because the company might attempt to get rid of a worker with high health costs, and they'd be stuck without coverage and a huge bill. In general, "the United States is being sucked dry for everybody," he said. "There's no real good jobs in the US."

Kevin Turnman was hired in April 1999 and then got laid off for three and a half years and then was rehired. "Above all," he said, "we want our health and safety to be one of the main priorities, and right now it's not."

"You've got certain kinds of paint in there that are harmful, and if you're in the spray booth, you're smelling paint fumes day in and day out." His coworker added, "There's some cadmium bolts in there that have been causing cancer."

As the strike began, Kevin said that "we all got letters from the company saying we've got no health insurance." "This is one of the few truck plants, the few UAW facilities that actually pays for our healthcare. We don't have a premium we have to pay out every week. We do have a co-pay, you have to pay 10 percent of your bill. It'd be awful hard for some of us out here to have to pay a \$100 premium per week."

An older worker commented on the general situation at the plant: "They just force you to take less and less and less, or they use the same strategy they did here in the last negotiation: 'Hey, you take this deal, or we're leaving,' and shifting production to Mexico. And every time they have a layoff, how much of the supervision do they get rid of?—none!"

He added, "Living standards have fallen, but look at the hits the big wheels have taken! Their income is tenfold what it was. Ford lost \$6 billion and the CEO still got a \$106 million bonus. It's just the trend in America right now—just kill the little man, and the money goes to the big man."



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