

UAW seeks to ram through contract at Volvo

Shelly Connor
21 March 2016

Workers at Volvo Trucks North America's Dublin, Virginia plant are awaiting the details of a new contract negotiated between Volvo and the United Auto Workers Local 2069.

The previous agreement expired at midnight on March 16. On March 17, the UAW posted on Facebook that an agreement had been reached in the early morning hours. The details of the agreement had not been specified by the evening of the 18th, although a worker did acquire and post a photo of an abbreviated summary. The document vaguely refers to wage increases, safety shoe allowances and other measures, the specifics of which are not given.

Posts by workers on the UAW's Facebook page reflect anxiety, anger and frustration at having been kept in the dark by both Volvo and the union. One worker, who was recently laid off, sardonically queried, "What did we lose beside my job?"

Some expressed hope that the 2-tier wage system had been abolished, giving all workers an equal opportunity to earn top wages, paid health insurance and pensions. Although some comments reflected this cautious optimism, most expressed fears that the new contract would actually represent a step backwards. One worker commented emphatically, "WE build Volvo the Profit. WE ARE VOLVO. WE deserve a contract worthy of a YES vote, and nothing less. NOT. A. DARN. THING. LESS."

Speaking on condition of anonymity, one of Volvo's workers told the *World Socialist Web Site* that he expected the UAW to make the entire contract available to workers the day before the vote, tentatively set for April 3. "The union won't even talk to us employees," the worker said. "They communicate by press releases, and that's it. All they tell us is, 'It's up in the air here, they're getting it done, they're working on it.'"

He said that there were reports that the contract includes a \$0.50 an hour raise for the next five years

and a \$2,000 signing bonus for second-tier workers. The UAW is not posting details and is forcing workers to come to union headquarters to view the agreement.

As the previous contract drew near its expiration date, the worker asked a union official what was happening with the contract. He was told to get up early and watch the news. Two days later, the details were still being closely guarded by both the UAW and Volvo.

"They have no agreement, no contract, no nothing, and I have a feeling that they're not even going to show us the contract until the day they're going to vote on it which is supposed to be on the third [of April]."

There is a scheduled layoff for a week beginning the last day of March, which would mean many tier-two workers will not be working when the contract is voted on. "This is going to get passed, whether we vote 'no' on it or not," the worker said. "People here feel helpless. The whole process is corrupt."

Volvo laid off about 500 employees in February in advance of the contract expiration. Volvo spokesman Jonathan Mies reported that the layoffs were required by sluggish market demand. In reality, the layoffs are a tactical maneuver designed to weaken workers' opposition to a concessionary agreement. This is the same tactic Volvo used ahead of negotiations in 2011, which resulted in the contract that just expired. It rehired 700 laid-off workers after the current agreement was ratified.

"They moved us around, caused a lot of turmoil," said the Volvo worker. "That's what they do, cause turmoil." He pointed to the new "experience center" Volvo is building at the plant, which will cost an estimated \$38.1 million. "They've made billions over the last three years," he said.

The laid-off workers, all of whom are second-tier, will be allowed to vote on the new contract, and Volvo is relying on them, as well as second-tier workers fearful of future layoffs, to vote for concessions. While

first-tier workers earn \$25.44 an hour, second-tier workers make \$18.77 an hour. Furthermore, second-tier workers are forced to pay into a 401(k) for retirement, whereas first-tier workers are given pensions.

This divide-and-conquer practice is used throughout the automotive industry. The UAW reinforces the division by conceding to the tiered wage system in contracts with automakers throughout the US.

In addition to fostering disunity through the two-tier system, the union has also quietly acquiesced to every ploy Volvo has used against workers. The UAW did nothing when the automaker threatened 734 workers with layoffs, nor did it act on behalf of the 500 who actually were laid off.

As the deadline for the contract loomed, the UAW refused to strike or take any action on behalf of the workers. “We should have walked out at midnight, when we didn’t have a contract anymore,” said the Volvo worker. Furthermore, the UAW agreed to give Volvo 90 days notice of any planned strikes, which would give the automaker time to plan against any loss that would arise from the strike.

Shortly after laying off 500 workers, Volvo informed the remaining workers that they would be required to work two back-to-back shifts on a Saturday, giving workers only a week to prepare for this change in their schedule. “They told us a week ahead,” the Volvo worker said. “The union didn’t say anything about it, they don’t do nothing, they don’t give a crap. [Volvo] doesn’t have enough people in the plant because of the layoffs, so they’re trying to get as many trucks built as they can in case of a strike.”

“[Volvo] has broken every union rule, asking us to work overtime and do extra work,” he continued, “and the union doesn’t do nothing. They don’t even come and ask us to vote on overtime.”

This is standard operating procedure for the UAW, which functions as an arm of corporate management. The UAW does whatever it can to prevent a struggle against the companies. It has consistently waited until the stroke of midnight to begin negotiations for contracts, keeping workers in the dark about agreements, and forcing votes on contracts that workers are barely given time to peruse.

This was the UAW’s method in negotiations with Ford, GM and Fiat Chrysler, where it pushed through concessions contracts last year through threats,

intimidation and outright fraud. At John Deere, workers were given only a few hours to read a self-serving contract summary before being forced to vote. Now the UAW is trying the same tricks at Volvo.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact