

Mack-Volvo Truck strike to idle 3,000 at Volvo's New River Valley factory in Virginia

Steve Filips
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The ongoing strike by 3,500 Mack and Volvo Truck workers, members of the United Auto Workers, is impacting production at Volvo Truck North America's (VTNA) largest factory, the New River Valley (NRV) assembly plant in Dublin, Virginia forcing the temporary layoff of 3,000 employees beginning October 21. Mack and Volvo Truck are subsidiaries Swedish based multinational Volvo Group. Workers at the New River Valley facility assemble the Volvo heavy-duty road trucks with engines and transmissions produced at the Mack-Volvo Hagerstown Powertrain production facility in Maryland where 1,100 workers have been on strike since last weekend.

The contract between the UAW and Mack-Volvo workers in Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Florida expired October 1, but they were kept working by UAW, which granted contract extensions until October 12.

The walkout is part of an expanding strike wave that includes 48,000 General Motors workers and over 30,000 Chicago Public Schools teachers and staff, as well as copper miners in Arizona and Texas. The UAW has sought to keep these struggles isolated, moving to shut down the GM strike while refusing to spread the Mack Truck strike to other Volvo facilities, which are continuing production.

John Mies, a spokesperson for Volvo, said in comments to *Freightwaves.com*, "We communicated to our employees this morning that NRV will stop production Monday because of the effects of the strike at our Hagerstown Powertrain factory operations. This will unfortunately result in the temporary layoff of about 3,000 employees."

The company and union are expected to resume negotiations on October 22 according to the same *Freightwaves.com* article. During the layoff, workers at

NRV have been instructed by Volvo Trucks to call in daily to determine if there is any work available.

A *Transport Topics* article from September 11 carried an announcement of a short-duration temporary shutdown slated for the fourth quarter, due to a slowdown in sales from last year's record pace. However, the article also noted that Mack and Volvo sales were up from the prior year by 20.2 and 10.7 percent respectively as of this past August. Volvo Group announced that its third quarter earnings Friday morning had increased to \$1.12 billion from \$1.05 billion over the same period last year. The company said it was expecting declines in the North American and European markets for next year.

Speaking on the contract negotiations with the UAW, Mack Truck spokesperson Christopher Heffner said, "While we don't typically comment on production, we can say that after two years of very strong demand, it's become clear that the North American market is softening to a more normalized level, and we need to align our production with demand." He continued, "To do so, Mack's Lehigh Valley operations will take two down weeks in the fourth quarter."

The threat of layoffs is an effort by management to promote feelings of job insecurity among the striking workers. Mack laid off 400 workers around the time of the last contract negotiations in 2016, which it partly attributed to a market slowdown.

In a provocative move, Mack-Volvo Trucks has terminated workers' health insurance coverage. Workers did not receive prior notice of the cancellation. Some only first realized it when they attempted to pick up prescriptions or visited a doctor.

In a post on its Facebook page, UAW Local 171 of Hagerstown, Maryland, reported that as of "Saturday, October 12, 2019, Volvo Group terminated all benefit

coverage for all blue and white collar employees covered under the collective bargaining agreement.” It went on to state that those that Mack-Volvo strikers could apply for “continuation of benefit coverage[s] as provided for by the UAW Strike Assistance Program.”

UAW Local 677 Shop Chair Kevin Fronheiser, a negotiator with the UAW’s Mack Truck Council in Allentown, Pennsylvania, said in comments to the media this Tuesday, “The membership gave us support at the negotiation table and the authorization to strike.” He went on to state the UAW sought a “fair and quick settlement.” However, the union has not issued a list of its demands and is conducting closed-door talks.

Underscoring the fear by the UAW that the strike by Mack-Volvo Truck workers may spark a broader movement in the working class the union has attempted to place a gag order on strikers, ordering workers not to speak to media. Despite this, *World Socialist Web Site* reporters discussed the issues in the strike with picketing workers Thursday at the Mack Truck plant in Macungie, Pennsylvania near Allentown that has close to 2,400 employees.

A Mack Truck worker with ten years related what he thought were some of the most important issues in the strike. “Fair treatment as a human being. There is no respect,” he said. Asked if that meant the company was not willing to pay enough, he responded, “There is never enough pay and benefits. It is more than just paying more for benefits. We have gone from having to pay nothing for benefits. Now we have to pay, and every contract it goes up. If there is an upsurge of strikes, it is because people are tired.”

The worker further observed, “This country needs to take a lesson from the French [workers]. When they fight, they shut the country down. They control the market.”

Despite the militancy and determination expressed by workers, there is a danger that the strike by Mack workers will be isolated and betrayed if it is left in the hands of the UAW. Over the last several decades the UAW has collaborated with the automobile, truck and heavy equipment companies to impose one round of concessions after another. At the same time hundreds of thousands of manufacturing jobs have been eliminated without any resistance by the unions.

The WSWS urges Mack-Volvo workers to study the lessons of the GM strike. We call for the formation of

rank-and-file committees, independent of the UAW, to take control of the struggle. Workers must formulate their own demands. They must fight for the spreading of the strike to other Volvo facilities and forge links with autoworkers, teachers and other sections of workers coming into struggle.



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