

Defying strike vote, UAW forces Volvo Truck workers to remain on job in Virginia

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Although Volvo Heavy Duty truck workers in southwestern Virginia voted by 96.8 percent to authorize strike action if a new agreement was not reached by the time their five-year contract expired on March 15, the United Auto Workers (UAW) union has kept workers on the job. Defying the strike vote, the UAW signed a 30-day contract extension, which expires on April 16, giving the company ample time to prepare for a strike.

There are 3,500 workers at the New River Valley (NRV) manufacturing plant in Dublin, Virginia. Volvo Truck workers are employed at facilities in Allentown and Middletown, Pennsylvania, Hagerstown and Baltimore, Maryland, and Jacksonville, Florida, but the UAW keeps workers at the Virginia plant under a separate labor agreement. In October 2019, the Mack-Volvo workers in Pennsylvania, Maryland and Florida struck for two weeks while the UAW kept NRV workers on the job even though they were hit by layoffs due to the strike. The last time Virginia Volvo workers struck was in February 2008.

Mack and Volvo Truck of North America (VTNA) are owned by the Swedish-based multi-national Volvo AB, which has over 105,000 employees at 18 production facilities worldwide. In 2020, revenues fell by 22 percent due to the economic slowdown caused by the pandemic, but the company made \$3.4 billion in profit with an 8.4 percent profit margin. This was largely due to cost-cutting measures, including the elimination of 7,791 jobs worldwide, including 450 white-collar positions in the US.

Although global truck orders were down for most of 2020, fourth quarter orders rose 61 percent. North American orders rose 167 percent to 24,939 trucks in 2020, driven by strong Q4 order volumes. By keeping workers on the job, the UAW is assisting the company

in producing more trucks and profits to offset the impact of any potential strike.

UAW Secretary-Treasurer and Heavy Truck Department Director Ray Curry, who oversaw the sellout of the 2019 Mack-Volvo strike, is once again in charge of negotiations at the New River Valley plant. In a statement to workers, he said, “Your overwhelming support of the UAW/Volvo Bargaining Committee is still needed throughout this process to enable us to reach our goal of a fair and equitable agreement for the membership.”

The vague statement about a “fair and equitable” agreement was issued on UAW letterhead that continues to list the former Gary Jones as union president, although he pleaded guilty to embezzling union funds.

Ray Curry is the second-highest paid UAW official, pocketing \$236,608 a year, according to recent union filings with the US Labor Department. While the union pays out more than \$3 million to the top 14 executives at its headquarters in Detroit, the UAW pays out little or nothing to workers engaged in real struggles. The UAW has sought to sabotage the walkout and starve striking graduate students at Columbia University in New York City, who have only got a miserly \$275 per week in strike benefits.

“Way to show ‘em we don’t mind being pushed around,” one Volvo NRV worker said in a wry comment on social media concerning the UAW’s unilateral imposition of the contract extension. Another said, “What a joke! You guys really just slapped us all right in the face with this BS!”

“Why are y’all waiting almost 3 weeks to start back negotiating? The only thing we can count on y’all to do is take our dues,” stated another NRV worker on the backroom negotiations between the UAW and Volvo.

At the time of the strike authorization vote in February, UAW Local 2069 officials made it clear they had no intention of leading a fight, with one official saying, “It is not the desire of the local to strike.”

The 2019 Mack-Volvo strike occurred while 50,000 GM workers, also in the UAW, were striking against the automaker’s use of low-paid temporary workers and other concessions granted by the union. The UAW blocked the unification of the GM and Mack-Volvo strikers while it worked to sell out the month-long GM strike.

US commercial truck manufacturing companies have seen a renewed demand for heavy duty trucks as a result of the pandemic’s impact on the amount of goods shipped and the need for trucks with better fuel efficiency. The trucking companies are confronting a high driver turnover and a shortage of drivers.

According to truck manufacture industry analysts, there have been several consecutive months of at least 40,000 new orders per month for new trucks this year. This is three times the amount ordered in February 2020 for Class 8 heavy-duty trucks.

The semiconductor shortage crisis is beginning to slow production at truck manufacturers in the US, and the NRV plant is one of the next slated to shut down. Volvo is facing “semiconductor shortages, as truck demand is exceeding the supply,” said company spokesperson Mary Beth Halprin.

The largest truck maker in the US, Daimler Trucks North America, which manufactures Freightliner and Western Star trucks, has implemented a slowdown at its plants in the US and Mexico due to the microchip shortage. Downtime is being rotated between plants in an effort to maintain production at Daimler’s more profitable facilities, which produce the Class 8 trucks segment, which retail for around \$150,000.

PACCAR corporation subsidiaries Peterbilt and Kenworth are attempting to continue production without the needed components, later adding chips when they become available. “Fleet activity is up, strong vocational market and used truck prices are increasing. We really feel like ’21 is going to be a robust year,” Kenworth General Manager Kevin Baney told the *Commercial Carrier Journal* in February.

Mack Trucks, Volvo Trucks North America and other truck manufacturers were forced to suspend production in March 2020, after a wave of wildcat strikes in

opposition to the corporatist unions by autoworkers in Europe, the US and Canada over the spread of COVID-19 forced the shutdown of much of the global auto industry. The UAW worked with the corporations to restart production in May 2020 and has kept workers on the job despite the current surge of infections in Michigan, where schools and workplaces are the central vectors of the new variants of the deadly disease.

The smashing defeat of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) at the Bessemer, Alabama, Amazon warehouse has exposed the deep gulf between the aspirations of workers who are looking for a way to fight and the corrupt organizations that call themselves “unions.” The same has been shown in the current strikes by Columbia University graduate student workers, St. Vincent nurses in Massachusetts, Warrior Met coal miners in Alabama, and ATI Steelworkers in Pennsylvania and other states.

In these struggles, striking workers are not only fighting management and both big business parties, but also the unions, which function as management’s labor police force.

If workers in Volvo are going to fight for their needs, they will have to form a rank-and-file strike committee, independent of the UAW, to prepare a real struggle and to appeal for common strike action with truck manufacturing workers across the US and internationally.



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