

# 2,900 Volvo Truck workers walk out in Virginia, joining ongoing strikes by coal miners, steelworkers, nurses

Marcus Day  
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On Saturday, 2,900 workers at Volvo Trucks' New River Valley plant in Dublin, Virginia, walked off the job, demanding higher wages and improved health and safety measures, benefits and job security. The walkout has begun amid a renewed growth of strikes and other forms of class struggle in the US and in other countries.

Volvo Truck workers had voted by an overwhelming 96.8 percent to strike in February. However, the United Auto Workers union ignored the strike mandate for months, extending the previous contract by 30 days, which gave the company time to prepare strikebreaking operations.

Volvo's 1.6 million-square-foot New River Valley facility is the largest producer of the company's tractor-trailer trucks in the world. Although Swedish-owned Volvo Group saw its revenue dip overall from 2019 to 2020 due to the pandemic, the transnational firm remains highly profitable, with a net income of approximately \$2.4 billion in 2020, and an operating margin of 12.6 percent in last year's fourth quarter. Truck orders have surged in recent months, with Volvo and other heavy-duty truck makers struggling to keep pace with demand amid the ongoing semiconductor shortage.

As throughout the auto industry and at other workplaces, workers at Volvo Trucks have been subjected to unsafe conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to widespread infections. "There have been around 30 of my coworkers out of about 60 who have been infected on my shift," a veteran worker at the plant told the *World Socialist Web Site*. "At least that many were infected in the same department on the other shift of two currently working."

"I know I came down with COVID-19 from working at the plant," he continued. Since contracting it last year, he has suffered lingering symptoms. "I am now a long hauler, and now I have trouble walking from my car back to my house."

Volvo's management restarted production at the factory at the end of April 2020—after a series of wildcat strikes by autoworkers had shut down the auto industry in mid-March—and has had a direct hand in the premature rollback of public health measures throughout Virginia. The vice president and general manager of the New River Valley plant, Franky Marchard, was appointed to the state's COVID-19 Business Task Force by Democratic Governor Ralph Northam last year.

The strike at Volvo is the latest in a series of walkouts and protests by workers in recent weeks. In every case, workers seeking to protect themselves from COVID-19 and recoup lost wages and benefits are quickly coming into conflict with the pro-corporate trade unions, which falsely claim to represent them.

On Friday morning, workers in the trim department at Stellantis' Jefferson North Assembly Plant in Detroit refused to work after one of their colleagues in the plant tested positive for COVID-19, with some saying on social media that a worker had been throwing up on the line. Workers told the WSWs that a UAW official nevertheless sought to convince workers to keep production running.

The virus is spreading so rapidly throughout Michigan, driven by the more infectious B.1.1.7 variant, that one of the workers on the disinfectant crew at the Jefferson plant subsequently tested positive.

Far from seeking to unite its members in a collective fight, the UAW is engaged in an increasingly desperate effort to "put out fires" and isolate strikes and other struggles. With an April 26 strike deadline approaching for graduate student workers at New York University, who are affiliated with the UAW, the union is moving to reach a settlement at Columbia University, where nearly 3,000 grad workers walked out March 15 to fight for higher wages and improved benefits. Earlier this month, the bargaining committee for the Graduate Workers of Columbia, also affiliated with the UAW, engineered a "pause" in the strike, defying the vote of the rank-and-file to continue the strike, and it was set to meet with university negotiators and a third-party arbitrator Sunday evening.

In Alabama, coal miners at Warrior Met Coal on April 9 rebelled against efforts by the United Mine Workers of America to pass a contract which failed to make up for the massive concessions the UMWA had accepted when the company's predecessor underwent bankruptcy five years ago. During union meetings presenting the deal, workers shouted down UMWA President Cecil Roberts, denouncing him as a sellout. The contract was voted down by a resounding 1,006 to 45, with workers burning copies of the agreement outside the vote.

In Pennsylvania and four other states, nearly 1,300 steelworkers at Allegheny Technologies Inc. (ATI) are in the second week of their strike. The United Steelworkers union is conducting the action as an "unfair labor practices" strike, seeking to avoid raising any concrete demands, and hoping to shut down walkout at the earliest opportunity under the pretext that the company is once again bargaining in "good faith." The USW is withholding strike pay until the walkout enters its fourth week, and the union has recently backpedaled on earlier claims that workers would be able to claim unemployment while on strike.

And in Massachusetts, some 700 nurses at St. Vincent Hospital, owned by multibillion-dollar corporation Tenet Healthcare, are in the second month of their strike, fighting for improved staffing and working conditions. The Massachusetts Nurses Association (MNA) union is seeking to starve nurses into submission, providing limited

strike pay only in cases of “hardship.”

There are signs that a new stage of the class struggle is beginning to erupt in other countries, too. In Taubaté, in the Brazilian state of São Paulo, nearly 700 workers struck last week at LG Electronics over plans by the South Korea-based company to close the plant, its only cell phone factory in the country. In Argentina, a 24-hour strike by 24,000 oil sector workers was blocked by the country’s labor ministry on Wednesday. Workers are demanding a 30 percent wage increase, in addition to a previously agreed-upon 15 percent raise, in order to keep up with the country’s skyrocketing inflation.

The strikes in recent months express a growing determination by workers to secure safe working conditions and reverse years of eroding pay and benefits.

The pandemic broke out amid, and temporarily disrupted, a rising tide of strikes and demonstrations by workers. There were 25 major work stoppages involving 1,000 or more workers in the US in 2019, the highest number in nearly two decades, a period throughout which the trade unions worked to suppress the class struggle. In 2020, the number of major work stoppages dropped to just eight, the third-lowest number going back to 1947, although this did not include many smaller wildcat job actions and walkouts carried out last year in defiance of the trade union bureaucracies.

Already in the first third of 2021, the number of major work stoppages has reached over half that of 2020, with strikes of over 1,000 workers among Hunts Point Produce Market workers, the Columbia grad workers strike, and the walkouts by Alabama coal miners, ATI steelworkers, and Volvo Truck workers.

The financial press has commented with growing nervousness recently over the possibility of “wage inflation,” with some manufacturing sectors and businesses such as restaurants increasingly forced to raise starting pay in order to attract sufficient applicants. In an article Saturday headlined “Economic Growth Is Set to Surge. Hiring Might Not Keep Up,” the *Wall Street Journal* noted that the rapid reopening of economic activity threatens to cause “bottlenecks” and “wage pressure” as companies scramble to fill positions.

“Over the next few months, you could see really strong demand, and you could get some of these pressures...in terms of wages, etc.,” Jay Bryson, chief economist at Wells Fargo’s Corporate and Investment Bank, told the *Journal*. Some of the largest retail and grocery chains, including Walmart, Costco, and Kroger, have all raised wages in recent months or announced plans to do so.

The financial aristocracy and its representatives are highly sensitive to any efforts by the working class to break out of the low-wage regime which has been enforced with the assistance of the trade unions over the last four decades. The vast stock market fortunes and trillions of dollars sucked up by billionaires in the course of the pandemic depend on the continuation and even intensification of poverty-level wages and hazardous working conditions.

The disgusting contrast between the unimaginable wealth hoarded by the “pandemic profiteers” and the mass death and social misery suffered by the working class is generating profound anger and opposition among broad layers of the population, which is increasingly seeking an outlet independent of the pro-corporate trade unions and all other official institutions.

On Saturday, autoworkers, Amazon workers, grad student workers, teachers and other workers attended an online meeting hosted by the Autoworker Rank-and-File Safety Committee Network, the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party (SEP). The event was called to discuss the demand for an emergency four-week

shutdown of the auto plants in order to stop the spread of the coronavirus ripping through factories in the Detroit area and throughout Michigan. Members of the SEP outlined a program for workers to organize and fight for safe working conditions, explaining the need to expand the network of rank-and-file committees, which have been built independently of the corporatist unions, in workplaces throughout the auto industry and beyond, both in the US and internationally.

“I think Jefferson has become one of the most hazardous plants in Michigan and is spreading the virus very highly,” a Stellantis Jefferson North Assembly worker told the meeting. “All the stuff they were supposed to do for us last year when we returned after they shut down because of COVID, they stopped doing.” The worker said that their daily self-screening symptom survey, much touted by the company and the UAW as an effective safety measure, had only recently started to be checked again, after being ignored for several months.

“They’re not protecting us,” he continued. “I feel like something’s going to really tragically happen to us if they don’t find a way to protect us and get the plant shut down for a while until COVID is contained or handled. And the governor’s not doing it.”

The worker spoke bitterly about the UAW, saying, “Our union is horrible. They’re not helping us, and they’re not on our side.”

“If we don’t stand together as one and take it upon ourselves to shut down the plant, it’s going to be bad. You all see the numbers [of dead], and the numbers don’t lie. I hope it gets shut down, and people get compensated, because it’s not our fault.”

A worker from a Detroit-area Amazon facility said she could not believe “how we, as workers in these big companies, are still being forced back into work with COVID spreading. People are still infecting people, even when they’re asymptomatic.” She said that workers were subjected to an environment “where you’re not able to, it’s impossible to, keep six feet of social distancing.

“Plants of this type of nature need to be shut down, and something needs to be done as far as pay for us, just to try to get a grip on the spread of this virus.”

“People are just getting tired of it, they are wanting something to do to stop this,” said an auto parts worker in Indiana and founding member of the Faurecia Gladstone Rank-and-File Committee. “What that means is these rank-and-file committees have to be built up, we have to prepare for a general strike around the world, and we have to take control so we can be properly taken care of while we shut down and get rid of this coronavirus.”



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