

“This is a slap in the face to come back without anything being signed or agreed upon”

Volvo Truck workers in Virginia livid over UAW strikebreaking

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For information on joining the Volvo Rank-and-File Committee, email volvowrfc@gmail.com.

The United Auto Workers abruptly ended the two-week strike by nearly 3,000 Volvo Truck workers in Dublin, Virginia, and sent third-shift workers back to work Sunday night even before workers were given a chance to review or vote on a new five-year contract.

“We are here tonight, and no one wants to be here,” one veteran worker told the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* Sunday night. “We think this is a slap in the face not to have had a vote and to come back without anything being signed or agreed upon.”

The UAW International announced it had reached the deal with Volvo on Friday and immediately instructed Local 2069 to take down picket lines at the New River Valley (NRV) plant. Adding insult to injury, UAW Secretary Treasurer Ray Curry, the head of the union’s Heavy Truck Department, said he would not release any details of the deal “out of respect” to Volvo workers, who will not vote on the agreement for another two weeks.

This set off a firestorm of opposition, with workers denouncing the UAW officials for stabbing them in the back and running roughshod over their rights. Articles written by the *World Socialist Web Site* on the UAW’s sabotage of the strike were circulated thousands of times. As one worker wrote, “Your article was dead-on how our union leadership is dirty and manipulative toward us.”

On the local’s Facebook page, local union officials urged workers to “be patient” and to not listen to “rumors.” They tried to dodge the angry reactions by saying they had no choice but to “abide with the International.” The local will be holding union meetings Monday, starting at 6 a.m.

On Saturday, with the assistance of the WSWs, striking workers set up the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee (VWRFC) and issued a statement titled “Stop the UAW sabotage of our strike! No contract, no work!” The committee opposed the return to work, demanded the release of the full

contract and said workers should have a full week to study and discuss it before a ratification vote.

The UAW has shut the strike down precisely at the point when it was having significant impact on the company, with the supply of Mack-Volvo trucks reportedly close to running out. Local union officials have made the absurd claim that they could call the workers back out on strike if they reject the deal later this month. By that time workers would have produced enough trucks for the company to stockpile in the event of another walkout.

The Volvo Rank-and-File Committee rejected claims that the corporation—which made \$1 billion in the first quarter—could not afford to pay for significant wage increases and other improvements. The committee has called on workers to fight for a 25 percent across-the-board wage increase to restore the income lost over the last three UAW contracts, the abolition of the multi-tier wage system, the ending of forced overtime and speedup and workers’ oversight of safety protocols and social distancing to protect workers from the spread of COVID-19.

The WSWs spoke with two Volvo workers about the issues in their struggle. Their names were changed to protect them against retaliation by management and the UAW. John, a veteran worker in the “Core Group” of higher-paid skilled workers, said, “The news that the strike was ending was just as quick as when we were told to go outside on strike. We’re getting nothing from the company or the UAW. There is no word on what the actual contract matters are. None.”

He reported that several workers asked the local union rep for details about the contract. “He went into shutdown mode and said he was advised not to tell us anything. That’s ridiculous. We are the union members, and they need to answer to us, we don’t answer to them.

“If UAW told us what was in the contract, people would reject it so fast that their heads would spin. If there was anything good in it, the local leaders would be telling everyone so they could get a pat on the back.”

Randy, a worker with more than 15 years at the plant, said,

“They want you to shut your mouth and just do what they say. We voted by 98 percent to strike. Then the union agreed to a 30-day extension of the contract. After there was no agreement, we went out. But from day one, back in February, they have kept workers in the dark. Nobody talks to us. They act as if talking to us is against the law.

“It’s like we’ve been on strike for two weeks for nothing. The union reps are saying if you don’t like the TA [tentative agreement], we can go back on strike. But why go back to work now?

“We heard that the strike was causing Mack Trucks to run out of supplies. We were told Mack was down to 150 trucks. The union rep said they used that for leverage to get concessions from the company, but he didn’t list any. In 2019, when Mack-Volvo was on strike, we were laid off because of the lack of parts.”

During the 2019 Mack Truck strike, the UAW forced NRV workers to remain on the job even as 3,500 of their co-workers struck Mack-Volvo plants in Pennsylvania, Maryland and Florida. After 12 days, Ray Curry and the UAW shut down the strike and ordered workers to return to work before voting on the deal. Weeks later workers were forced to vote on the deal having only seen the self-serving “highlights” released by the UAW. The agreement maintained the hated two-tier wage system and the widespread use of temporary workers, and included an insulting 6 percent raise over four years, less than the rate of inflation.

Randy continued, “Each contract is worse than the previous one. A rep told me that a stack of grievances just goes away as part of the contract talks, they simply wash their hands of them. It’s like we’re at the mercy of the company and the union. They want us to shut our mouths and take it.”

Randy discussed the conditions workers faced and what workers needed. “Volvo used to be the place to be. It had the best wages in a 50- to 75-mile radius, and it would be worth traveling an hour or more to get here. But now the starting wage is \$16.50 an hour. You can get \$15 at Walmart just around the corner and you wouldn’t have your body and soul worn out. They try to hire workers, but you can get virtually the same thing at Chick-fil-A or Hobby Lobby, and you won’t be browbeat and intimidated like you are at Volvo or come home so tired that you can’t lift your kids up. We need good wages. If you have eight years or less here, there is no incentive to work.”

In the 2008 contract, the UAW introduced a multi-tier wage system. Starting pay is \$16.50 an hour, and after eight years wages are capped at \$21 an hour. The top pay for the most senior assembly workers is \$26.85, and \$28.85 for so-called “facilitators.”

“If you have less than eight years, you will never get to the top pay scale,” Randy said. “Before 2008, it took one to two years to get top pay. Now after 8-10 years, \$21 is as high as you go. There is a nearly \$8 an hour differential between a

worker with eight years and top wage earners. Between new hires and top earners there is a \$12 an hour gap. You can be working side-by-side with someone making \$80,000 more than you over five years. In the case of new hires, it could be a \$120,000 difference over five years.

“We used to say that there are two groups here: the ‘Core Group’ and the ‘Poor Group.’ But it is not the fault of the Core Group. The company and the union want to divide us against each other. They want to turn new hires against older workers. We have to stop that and ensure that everybody makes the same amount.”

John added, “They are always threatening the Core Group by bringing in contractors to take our jobs. The union says they can’t do anything to stop it.”

Randy also spoke about the grinding work schedules at the plant. “They are supposed to inform you when there is going to be overtime more than 30 minutes before you are scheduled to go home. The entire shop is supposed to close at the end of the day. But if there are trucks to be finished, some parts of the plant can be forced to work eight-and-a-half or nine hours to get them out the door. They tell you just 30 minutes before you are supposed to leave.

“Everyone feels like they are an inmate here. From the food to the attitude, it’s like you are bound against your will to be here. Workers are constantly saying, ‘To hell with this place.’ Our mental health is always being worn down. Your body and your mind are being worn out.”

Both workers said they supported the formation of the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee to take the conduct of the fight out of the hands of the UAW.

“We have to appeal to everyone to fight and explain what they could win if there is a real fight,” Randy said. “The balance of power is between the company and the UAW. But the workers are fed up with both sides. If we stand up and build this rank-and-file committee, that will weaken their grip over us.”



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