

# Support grows among Volvo, Mack Truck workers for joint fight against UAW-backed concessions

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After a courageous two-week strike by thousands of workers at Volvo Truck's New River Valley (NRV) Assembly plant in Virginia was abruptly shut down by the United Auto Workers union last weekend without a vote, hostility to the UAW-backed concessionary tentative agreement is mounting.

NRV workers confront a well-rehearsed UAW sabotage effort aimed at imposing yet another sellout contract designed to lower labor costs and boost company profits.

After extending the previous contract for 30 days while ignoring a 96.8 percent strike authorization vote, allowing the company time to stockpile trucks, the UAW grudgingly allowed an "unfair labor practices" strike to begin on April 16, faced with the overwhelming sentiment of workers for a fight to substantially improve wages and working conditions. However, the union maintained complete silence on the status of negotiations both leading up to and during the course of the strike, working out plans with Volvo in backroom sessions to end the strike at the earliest opportunity and attempt to rush through the company-dictated agreement.

Last Friday at 1 a.m., the Facebook page of UAW Local 2069 instructed strikers to abandon their pickets and return to work Sunday evening because a tentative agreement was reached with Volvo. The local refused to disclose a single detail of this "agreement," stating they had been "advised" not to, as workers demanded to know what had been won that would merit a return to work.

Anger at the UAW reached a boiling point Monday morning when dozens of skilled trades workers confronted local bargaining chair Greg Shank and demanded to see the contract documents in the latter's hand. Several workers took photographs of the pages, which contained key terms of the tentative agreement outlining substantial givebacks in health benefits and other losses for workers.

It is time to sound the alarm: There is no time to lose in order to defeat the miserable UAW-Volvo concessions deal! Workers at Volvo NRV should begin organizing immediately—campaigning across shifts and tiers to build momentum for an overwhelming "no" vote. Workers did not sacrifice two weeks of pay on the picket lines in order to see their real wages and benefits decline still further over the next five years!

To establish the organizational basis for this struggle, workers

should join and expand the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee. The committee was initiated last weekend by workers at the NRV plant in collaboration with the WSWs in order to organize a fight against the UAW-engineered sabotage of the strike.

The defeat of the UAW's pro-company contract would have a powerful catalyzing impact among other sections of workers, particularly Mack Truck workers in Pennsylvania, Maryland and Florida, whom the UAW has sought to isolate from Volvo Truck workers despite them working for the same parent company. The UAW forced through a company-friendly agreement on Mack Truck workers in 2019 after calling off a 12-day strike.

Workers at Mack Truck have followed the strike at Volvo closely and with intense sympathy, sharing information with Volvo workers on social media on their own experiences with the UAW's double-dealing in their last contract, and writing to the WSWs to ask how they can assist Volvo Truck workers.

The little information gleaned by workers about the Volvo NRV agreement shows that it would double health care deductibles, increase copays by 50 percent, raise maximum out-of-pocket payments from \$1,500 per family to a whopping \$4,000 annually and eliminate Supplemental Unemployment Benefits (SUB pay). Combined with signs of growing inflation in consumer prices, the increases in health care costs would rapidly eat away at the nominal wage increases in the deal.

The UAW's "selling point" in the tentative agreement is the provision supposedly moving newer hires from an initial wage of \$15 per hour to a maximum of \$30 per hour after a period of *eight years*, a timeframe that defines the word "meaningless" given the five-year term of the contract in question. Nothing would prevent the company and the UAW from capping the maximum hourly wage at \$20 in the next contract (or even earlier, using a sharp economic decline as a pretext to reopen the current contract, as the UAW has acceded to several times before at other companies), or from creating yet another tier of new hires with no benefits at all, who could be levied against future "legacy workers."

As at the Detroit Three auto companies, John Deere, Caterpillar and virtually every other section of workers "represented" by the UAW, the tier system has been used to divide the workforce, in an abandonment of the principle of "equal pay for equal work," and has allowed the company to pit the newer generation against the

older, continually lowering labor costs and increasing profits. A union official underscored this reality this week, contemptuously telling a “Core Group” legacy worker, “You’re not the majority.”

In comments reflecting the widely felt desire for unified struggle and hatred of the tier system, a second-tier worker at NRV told the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter*: “They pit us against one another in the tiers. I do want to get where they are now [in hourly pay] but not in the way the tentative agreement does it. I don’t want to lose my health insurance, nor do I want to pay more for it.

“There needs to be unity among the different tiers. We need to do something before ratification. We need to get as many people as possible to oppose this contract.”

A retired worker also expressed her contempt for the agreement, writing to the WSWS to say, “They’ve treated us like crap too! When we retired we had no insurance premium. Today, I pay \$400 per month for my husband and me. Where was the [Local 2069] president after negotiations? Not around to answer questions. He was gone to the beach!!!! He left it to the others instead of facing what he knew he would be!”

While Local 2069 has sought to divert blame for the shutdown of the strike onto the UAW International and Secretary Treasurer Ray Curry, the head of the union’s Heavy Truck Department, they are undoubtedly aware and fearful of the explosive anger rank-and-file workers feel towards the UAW apparatus from top to bottom.

A UAW Local 2069 membership notification letter announces that a contract ratification meeting is scheduled for Sunday, May 16, from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m., although contract voting is scheduled to take place on the same date from 9 a.m. until 5 p.m. Therefore, Volvo NRV workers who want to both participate in the ratification meeting and then vote afterwards—that is, who want to discuss the contract and hear the views of coworkers—will have a mere two-hour window to do so.

The announcement also provocatively warns retirees not to attend the ratification meeting and cites a bylaws provision on expelling members for unruly conduct or intoxication. It is clear that the UAW expects massive, vocal resistance to its backstabbing maneuvers and is prepared to use local law enforcement to quell opposition. A democratic process by workers who have carefully considered the contract terms and deliberated—this is to be prevented at all costs.

Workers at NRV must be warned that the UAW is employing the same criminal *modus operandi* it used in 2019 when 3,600 workers at Mack-Volvo facilities in Pennsylvania, Maryland and Florida went on strike to win back the numerous concessions which had been forked over to the company in past agreements.

As with the current struggle at NRV, the UAW kept workers on the job for two weeks after their contract expired, allowing Volvo to prepare strikebreaking tactics in advance of a work stoppage, and only called the strike for fear of an explosion of workers’ anger, particularly amid the powerful strike by 46,000 General Motors workers. When the union finally called the walkout, it maintained radio silence about negotiations.

The UAW called off the Mack strike after only 12 days, announcing a tentative agreement—likewise without any details—and ordering a return to work the following day. The UAW only released “highlights” of the agreement immediately prior to

the ratification vote.

Throughout the 2019 strike, the UAW kept Volvo NRV’s 3,000 workers on the job, even though they worked on the same trucks and were organized as subsidiaries of the same company. Taking the old method of divide-and-conquer to new depths, the UAW maintains separate contracts for NRV workers and Mack workers, not to mention for Freightliner, Navistar and workers at Detroit’s Big Three auto companies.

The struggle at Volvo Truck NRV has emerged as part of a growth of working class resistance in both the US and in other countries. In recent weeks, walkouts have gotten underway by 1,100 coal miners in Alabama; 1,300 ATI steelworkers in Pennsylvania, Ohio and other states; hundreds of nurses in Massachusetts; and thousands of graduate student workers at Columbia University and New York University in New York City, both of whom are under the treacherous “representation” of the UAW. At Columbia, grad workers courageously defied the UAW last Friday and voted down a union-backed deal which failed to meet their demands.

Beyond the US, teachers in São Paulo, Brazil, electricity workers in Istanbul, Turkey, tea plantation workers in Sri Lanka and other sections of workers have carried out strikes and job actions since the beginning of the year.

In every attempt to advance their interests and defend against further company attacks, workers are coming into conflict with the corporatist trade unions, which work to enforce management discipline and enact concessions. In return, the union officialdom has attained for itself lavish incomes and privileges, as exemplified perhaps most starkly by former UAW President Dennis Williams, who is one of two recent UAW presidents, along with Gary Jones, to be indicted for corruption and is due to be sentenced in the coming weeks.

The Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee is leading the efforts to rally opposition and prepare a genuine fight to win substantially higher wages and benefits and to put an end to the tier system once and for all. We encourage workers at both Volvo and Mack Truck to contact the committee and get involved in building it today.



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