

The significance of the Volvo Truck workers' rebellion in Virginia

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On Sunday, workers at Volvo Trucks New River Valley plant in Dublin, Virginia, overwhelmingly rejected a five-year labor agreement proposed by the United Auto Workers (UAW). According to the UAW, 91 percent of the Volvo workers who cast ballots voted to reject the deal.

At every point in their struggle, the nearly 3,000 workers at the Volvo plant have confronted the treachery of the UAW. Workers walked out on strike at the truck manufacturing plant on April 17, determined to reverse the concessions the UAW has handed to the Swedish-based multinational over the last four contracts. The UAW abruptly shut down the two-week strike on April 30, claiming it had reached an agreement with “significant gains” for workers. The UAW immediately ordered workers to return to their jobs without seeing, let alone voting on the agreement.

As details of the deal began to emerge, opposition mounted against the UAW. With the assistance of the Socialist Equality Party and the World Socialist Web Site, militant workers formed the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee (VWRFC). The committee issued statements, read by thousands of workers, calling for the defeat of the contract, which included pay raises below the rate of inflation, near-poverty-level wages for lower seniority workers, attacks on health care and pension benefits, and a new 10-hour workday.

As they have done with one sellout after another for decades, UAW officials attempted to browbeat workers by insisting that nothing better could be achieved and that the defeat of the contract would lead to long, futile strike and the company moving jobs to Mexico. Despite the arrogant predictions of top UAW executives that their deal would pass by 60 percent, Volvo workers turned out in record numbers and cast a near-unanimous “no” vote.

Now, the UAW is insisting that workers stay on the job after the defeat of the contract. After sabotaging the first

strike, the UAW insists that workers help Volvo build up its stockpile of trucks to withstand another strike. Meanwhile, UAW officials are going through the plant to take a “survey” of what workers want in a new contract proposal—so they can sell out these demands once again.

Volvo workers have taken a stand against the ruling class and its apparatchiks in the UAW. This is an important advance. Now the question is how to develop and expand this struggle.

First, no confidence can be given to any section of the UAW International or Local 2069 Bargaining Committee. A new bargaining committee, elected by the workers, must be formed to advance workers' demands.

The WSWS Autoworker Newsletter calls on all workers to join the VWRFC and formulate demands that meet the needs of workers, including a substantial pay raise to make up for the last four UAW contracts; a cost-of-living escalator clause; the abolition of the two-tier wage system; the enforcement of the eight-hour day and sufficient paid time off; and health care and pensions fully paid by the employer.

The fight of Volvo workers must be expanded and connected with the development of the class struggle throughout the US and internationally. The massive rebuke to the UAW is one of a series of unmistakable signs of rising working-class militancy.

Last month, striking Warrior Met Coal miners in Alabama voted 1,006–45 to defeat a deal pushed by the United Mine Workers (UMW), which failed to restore past pay cuts. Massachusetts nurses, Texas ExxonMobil workers, Allegheny Technology steelworkers in Pennsylvania and other states, along with grad student workers at New York University and Columbia University, have all been engaged in drawn-out strikes and lockouts, where they confront not only the employers and the government, but the treachery of the unions.

Throughout the world, from Turkey and Germany to

Colombia and Sri Lanka, workers are engaged in a rising tide of class struggle against the ruling class's criminal response to the pandemic. They are fighting austerity measures imposed by capitalist governments that have propped up the stock market and the private fortunes of the billionaires. The growth of working-class resistance is further fueled by the sharp rise in food and gas prices and other living expenses.

The fear in the ruling class of a growing movement of the working class was expressed by the Wall Street Journal Editorial Board in a statement Sunday, which bitterly complained about rising wage "expectations," particularly as workers gain confidence due to a labor shortage. "The risk is that as inflation expectations rise, they become embedded in consumer behavior and business decisions. Workers demand higher wages to keep up with prices no matter the underlying productivity; businesses pay to keep those workers and then raise prices to compensate. Workers then demand high wages, as expectations are hard to break."

The spokesmen for the financial oligarchy at the Wall Street Journal choose to ignore the fact that over the last 40 years, labor productivity has risen by 70 percent while hourly compensation has stagnated. The hoarding of these productivity gains by the corporate and financial elite—who contribute nothing to society—has cost workers an estimated \$50 trillion over the past four decades. If wages kept up with productivity gains, every worker in the bottom 90 percent of the population would be making an additional \$1,144 a month, 12 months a year, year after year.

The rank-and-file committee is independent of the pro-corporate UAW, so that workers can organize their own struggle.

A massive social eruption is developing, which is pitting the working class against the ruling elite and the entire capitalist system. The global coronavirus pandemic and the homicidal response of the ruling class to it has contributed to an enormous growth of anger and opposition.

Under these conditions, a faction of the ruling class sees in the trade unions a critical instrument for the suppression of opposition.

It is noteworthy that the corporate media has all but ignored the vote by the Volvo workers. Contrast this to the wall-to-wall coverage the New York Times, the Washington Post and other media outlets provided for the unionization campaign at the Amazon warehouse in Bessemer, Alabama.

Despite the media promotion and the Biden administration's support for the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU), however, Amazon workers overwhelmingly rejected the RWDSU, because they had no confidence in the official unions, which have spent the last four decades imposing the dictates of big business.

Biden—who will be at a Ford factory today alongside UAW executives who have forced workers to remain on the job during the pandemic—is seeking to fortify the unions against the growth of working-class opposition and political radicalization to the left. In this the White House is supported by various middle-class groups, from the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) to Left Voice, whose members have increasingly gained lucrative positions and careers in the union apparatus. This includes the American Federation of Teachers, which Biden is relying on to reopen the schools even as COVID-19 continues to spread.

Workers in every struggle—at Warrior Met Coal, St. Vincent Hospital in Worcester, Massachusetts, ATI steelworkers, ExxonMobil workers, Amazon and autoworkers—all face the same challenge. To take forward their fight, new organizations of struggle, democratically controlled by the rank-and-file and committed to the methods of the class struggle, not class collaboration, must be built.

The SEP and WSWS will give workers the information they need, help establish the lines of communication to coordinate common action and provide every assistance to develop and expand the class struggle. We urge Volvo workers to join and expand the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee and the growing network of rank-and-file committees in the US and throughout the world.



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