

Volvo workers to UAW: “We won’t accept another contract proposal cooked up behind our backs”

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20 May 2021

After overwhelmingly defeating a United Auto Workers-backed contract last Sunday, rank-and-file Volvo Truck workers in Virginia are stepping up their campaign to prevent the UAW from ramming through another sellout deal.

On May 16, workers voted by 91 percent to defeat the agreement, which included pay raises below the rate of inflation, a sharp increase in out-of-pocket medical costs and the continuation of the multi-tier wage system, which traps new hires and lower-seniority workers in a years-long cycle of inferior pay and benefits. The deal would have also introduced a 10-hour workday and continued cuts to retiree benefits.

The UAW shut down of the two-week strike by nearly 3,000 workers at Volvo’s New River Valley plant (NRV) in Dublin, Virginia on April 30, just at the point when the walkout was threatening the company’s ability to fulfill truck orders. UAW Secretary-Treasurer Ray Curry, who negotiated the deal as head of the UAW’s Heavy Truck Department, declared that it contained “significant gains” and ordered Volvo workers to return to the job without voting or even seeing the agreement.

In the days that followed, workers forced the UAW to release some of the details and opposition rapidly grew. A group of workers formed the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee (VWRFC) and issued statements that were widely circulated in the plant. The VWRFC called on workers to reject the tentative agreement and played a central role in defeating the contract.

In the aftermath of the vote, the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee has won growing support. On Wednesday, the VWRFC issued an open letter to United Auto Workers President Rory Gamble, Secretary Treasurer Ray Curry and UAW Local 2069 President Matt Blondino stating that Volvo workers would reject

any deal negotiated behind their backs and that did not meet the workers’ basic demands.

According to workers on the committee, the letter has “spread like wildfire” in the plant. It recounts the UAW’s “rotten maneuvers” to get the contract passed, including “lies and bullying” and the release of “rosy highlights” that painted over the real character of the sellout. “Only by demanding the contract details did we learn anything real about the agreement, and once we learned what you had really done, we swiftly and decisively rejected it,” the letter states.

Pointing to the bogus survey of “Top Five Contract Suggestions” the UAW circulated earlier this week while keeping workers on the job stockpiling trucks for Volvo, the letter says. “No doubt you intend to send this survey to the same place you sent the last one—into the trash.”

It then states that workers “will not accept any contract that is negotiated behind closed doors. All negotiations must be supervised by a representative of the rank-and-file workers. We will not accept another contract proposal cooked up behind our backs, for the simple reason that this would only produce another sellout.”

As a second condition, the letter outlines the minimum basis for an agreement that workers will accept. This includes a 25 percent across-the-board wage increase to restore income lost over the last three contracts, the maintenance of current health insurance rates and coverage, fully paid health benefits for retirees, and an end to the multi-tier wage system. The committee also says the contract must eliminate the Alternative Work Schedule and keep current overtime rules, implement a COLA clause to meet the soaring prices of consumer goods, and provide five personal days for all workers, not just salaried workers.

The letter rejects any claim that these demands are

unaffordable for a company that reported \$1 billion in profits in the first three months of 2021 alone.

The letter concludes: “These are not requests, but demands. And we are prepared to fight for them.”

One worker who spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* described widespread enthusiasm for the call to join and build the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee. “Brothers and sisters are trying to figure out what to do next because the UAW is pulling the wool over our eyes” he said. “A lot of people are disgruntled. They are at wits end, asking ‘how do we get out of this?’

“We need the guidance and leadership of this rank-and-file committee. We don't want to step out of line and have them make an example of us and have everybody scared. I've been pushing the VWRFC, I've been talking about it and sending links to the website [*WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*] and everybody says, ‘Wow, that's the truth.’ What we need to do is have membership take this [contract struggle] forward.”

The defeat of the contract sent shockwaves throughout Volvo headquarters in Gothenburg, Sweden and the UAW headquarters in Detroit. A Volvo worker told the *WSWS* that two corporate jets quietly landed at a tiny nearby regional airport earlier this week, one from Volvo Group, the other from Amazon, which has ordered hundreds of trucks from Volvo. A joint tour of the assembly plant by Volvo and Amazon executives revealed a massive “float,” or quantity of incomplete vehicles.

Volvo management has reportedly threatened plant manager Frank Marchand with termination unless he resolves the contract dispute within two weeks.

At the same time, Volvo, which workers say controls Pulaski County and has close political relations with Virginia's Democratic Governor Ralph Northam (Marchand is on the governor's COVID task force), is reportedly making preparations for a possible resumption of the strike.

A worker from a Holiday Inn in Dublin tipped off a Volvo worker that professional security guards had started moving into the hotel. The NRV worker who courageously reported this information to coworkers at the plant has reportedly been suspended.

Volvo has also given its marching orders to the UAW to push through the contract. On Thursday afternoon, the UAW circulated a leaflet stating that negotiations with the company had led to “changes to the previous tentative agreement” and that these changes “will be communicated to the membership.”

What followed was another hodgepodge of supposed “highlights,” but this time for a six-year agreement, instead of five. While maintaining the hated multi-tier wage system, the UAW tries to sell it by saying the years needed to reach top pay would be reduced from eight to six years and promises that the membership will have a chance to vote on establishing the 10-hour day. A few lump sum bonuses are combined with vague and meaningless promises. A bullet point on out-of-pocket health costs concludes, “details to follow,” a phrase which aptly summarizes the entire document.

The release of the leaflet only made workers angrier. “I think it's not worth the paper it's written on,” one worker said.

A member of the Rank-and-File Committee told the *WSWS*, “The big guy from Sweden came and they went back to negotiations to reword a few things. They are trying to blow smoke in our eyes like they have always done in the past.”

Another member wrote: “They are trying to be sneaky. Didn't really change anything. Just worded it differently to make you all think they changed a lot. Just like putting the 12% for core group but it is a six-year contract so that would be 2% a year. Don't be fooled.”

The Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee is being built as the genuine voice of Volvo workers in the plant. In opposition to the UAW and its efforts to divide workers, the committee is fighting to unify all workers and link up their struggles with workers at the Mack-Volvo plants in Maryland, Pennsylvania and Florida and workers throughout the truck and auto industry.

The Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee is urging workers to join and build the committee by contacting it by email at volvowrfc@gmail.com or by text at (540) 307-0509.



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