“We need unity”: Volvo Truck workers in Virginia prepare to defeat UAW sellout contract

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Rank-and-file Volvo Truck workers at the New River Valley (NRV) plant in Dublin, Virginia are building up momentum to defeat a second attempt by the United Auto Workers to push through a pro-company labor agreement. Nearly 3,000 workers, who rejected the first deal by 91 percent, will be voting on the UAW-backed deal at a ratification meeting this Sunday.

Officials from UAW International headquarters in Detroit, Region 8 in Tennessee and Local 2069 in Dublin have confronted widespread opposition from workers who have denounced the new deal as simply a rehash of the first. The six-year contract would maintain the hated multi-tier wage and benefit system, continue the erosion of real wages, impose higher medical costs, impose a new 10-hour workday, and pave the way for further cuts in retiree benefits.

Already determined to vote the contract down and convinced they would hear nothing but lies from UAW officials, Volvo workers largely boycotted the so-called town hall meetings where union officials tried to sell the deal on Wednesday and Thursday. “Workers felt no matter what we say, they’re going to do what they want to do—and the workers are going to do what we have to do,” one Volvo worker told the WSWS.

Those workers who did attend angrily confronted UAW Local 2069 President Matt Blondino and other union officials over the sellout and their refusal to release the full proposal. The UAW officials defended the contract and echoed management’s claims that there was no money to bring the lower-tier workers up to top pay scale more quickly than over a period of six years. Union officials also said that if the contract was rejected the company could come back with a worse offer.

Sweden-based Volvo Group made $1 billion in profits in the first three months of 2021, compared with $560 million a year earlier, based on increased deliveries of trucks and construction equipment. First quarter profit margins jumped from 8.1 percent in 2020 to 12.8 percent. While crying broke, Volvo paid CEO Martin Lundstedt $5.2 million last year, 153 times more than a newly hired Volvo assembly worker.

The Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee (VWRFC) is circulating a statement calling for workers to vote “no” on what it says “is not a labor agreement but a sales contract for six years of industrial slavery.” The statement outlines the conditions that would have to be met for workers to support a contract, including abolishing the multi-tier system, a 25 percent raise plus cost-of-living increases, the defense of the eight-hour day and no cuts to health care or pension benefits.

The committee is also countering efforts by the UAW to intimidate workers with the prospect of a long, futile strike if they reject the contract.

Workers are ready for a serious battle, but such a fight must not be allowed to be isolated by the UAW and the AFL-CIO and led to defeat. To conduct a fight and win, workers must have full pay from the UAW’s $790 million strike fund and the ability to oversee negotiations and fight to spread the struggle to the Mack-Volvo plants in Pennsylvania and Maryland and other sections of workers.

The UAW’s abrupt shutdown of the workers' two-week strike on April 30 has allowed the company to stockpile up to 2,000 trucks. “The company has been getting ready for a storm,” a Volvo worker told the WSWS.

“We are willing to stay out as long as it takes,”

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another Volvo worker said. “Two weeks won’t be enough to hurt them. But to stay out, we have to tap into the strike fund. The strike pay has to be tripled to $750 a week to allow people to stay out longer without fear of losing their homes.

“It’s not the company that’s got us by the balls, it’s the national union because of its control of the strike fund. Some of us have saved up for a long strike, but many, especially the younger workers, are living paycheck to paycheck. We need unity and that means getting enough strike pay to stay out.”

The statements of the VWRFC and articles from the WSWS have been widely circulated in the plant, winning the support of workers and the hostility of the UAW. “I’ve read the open letter to the UAW and your newsletters because workers leave them on the break tables,” a worker with 15 years at the plant said.

“The union goes around saying, ‘They're a bunch of union-busters.’ But I say, the UAW busted the union when it accepted two-tier wages. The union busted itself. Your newsletter does an awesome job with all the research it does to help us.”

Warning her co-workers about the possibility that the UAW would stuff the ballots in order to pass the contract on Sunday, she said, “I’m telling workers to take a picture of their ‘no’ vote on Sunday, so the UAW doesn’t try fraud to get it passed. There is not a single person I’ve spoken to who said they are going to vote for this. What angers me is the tier system. The UAW says it’s done away with it, but when you turn to the next page you see all the tiers.

“When I hired in it took two years to reach the top pay. Then it took three years, and now it’s going to be the length of the six-year contract. Some people will never see it. How can you expect anybody to care about their job when they are making $10 less than the person working right next to them?

“Twenty years ago, you couldn’t beat working here. In the 1980s, people slept outside for a chance to apply for a job at Volvo. Now all they want is to get more work out of you and not pay you. I wouldn’t want to cut anybody’s throat to get ahead. Everybody should be equal and get the same pay. That is what a union is supposed to do.”

She also pointed to the UAW’s abandonment of the eight-hour-day, which was won after the bitter 1941 strike at Ford. “They’ve got guys working 10 hours in the paint shop already. They’re bringing in the 10-hour, four-day schedule, so they don’t have to pay overtime after eight hours anymore, only after 40 in a week. But I got a life after work.

“A strike would help. I was prepared to stay out months or even a year to get what we need. We have more leverage now. I hear if we shut them down, the company will have to get on the back of the line for microchips and they already have a shortage.”

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