

Volvo Truck workers in Virginia return to the picket lines: A turning point in the US and global class struggle

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Following Sunday's massive repudiation of the second sellout contract negotiated by the pro-corporate United Auto Workers, 3,000 workers at the Volvo Truck North America's New River Valley Plant in Dublin, Virginia, are back on the picket line. Inasmuch as the struggle of the Volvo truck workers has been scarcely reported on in the national media and all but ignored in the publications of the middle-class pseudo-left organizations, it is necessary to provide a concise review of the events leading up to Sunday's vote.

The UAW's betrayal

Volvo workers originally went out on strike on April 17, determined to reverse the concessions that had been granted by the UAW to the Sweden-based transnational corporation over the last three contracts. Two weeks later, on April 30, the union bureaucracy announced that a settlement had been reached and ended the strike, without workers either seeing or voting on the contract.

As details of the agreement, loaded with humiliating concessions, leaked out through the efforts of the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee (VWRFC), a groundswell of opposition swept through the factory. On May 16, the agreement was voted down with a landslide margin of 91 percent against and only 9 percent for.

Refusing to resume the strike, the UAW entered a second round of negotiations. Within little more than a week, the union announced that it had reached a tentative agreement. Attempting to intimidate the workers, the union warned that a rejection of the contract would result in a six-month strike without any improvement in the terms of the agreement.

Despite this threat, as it became clear that the union had merely tweaked the language of the original rotten agreement, rank-and-file opposition intensified, culminating in Sunday's second rejection of the union's sellout. Once again, 90 percent of workers voted against the agreement.

Unable to contain opposition, the UAW finally authorized a resumption of the strike on Monday afternoon.

The rank-and-file insurgency

The overwhelming rejection of the UAW's attempted sellout by a powerful contingent of industrial workers is the latest manifestation of an upsurge of working-class militancy, which is assuming the form of an

insurgency against the UAW and other AFL-CIO affiliated unions.

In recent months, a wide range of workers have openly defied these organizations. In Alabama, over a thousand miners have been on strike against Warrior Met Coal since April 1. On April 9, they voted down a tentative five-year contract negotiated by the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) by the astonishing margin of 1,006 to 45.

Workers are seeing these organizations for what they really are: anti-labor institutions that are "unions" in name only, and that are run by unaccountable and affluent upper-middle class bureaucrats—pulling down six-figure salaries—who have nothing but contempt for the workers they represent. These "unions" function not as defensive organizations of the working class, but as direct and enthusiastic accomplices of the corporations in the exploitation of the working class.

The collaboration of the unions with the corporations and the state has taken its most vile form in their refusal to protect workers against the danger of infection in factories, other unsafe work locations and, especially, schools during a pandemic that has claimed 600,000 lives in the United States during the last 15 months. The teachers' union, led by Randi Weingarten (whose annual salary is \$500,000), has been at the forefront of the dangerous "return-to-work" (i.e., herd immunity) campaign.

The historical background

The significance of the rebellion of the Volvo Truck workers and growing wave of rank-and-file militancy can only be fully understood when placed in a broader historical context.

This coming August 3 will mark the fortieth anniversary of the beginning of the strike by the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO). Within just a few hours of the start of the strike, President Ronald Reagan, working with a plan of action that had been prepared by the previous administration of Democratic President Jimmy Carter, ordered an immediate return to work. He threatened the firing of controllers who did not comply with his order. The overwhelming majority of strikers defied Reagan. On August 5, the Reagan administration went ahead with the termination of 11,345 PATCO members. Leading union militants were arrested and eventually imprisoned for having gone on strike.

This historically unprecedented assault on a union and rank-and-file workers by the federal government succeeded only because the national AFL-CIO flatly refused to come to the defense of PATCO. It was widely and correctly assumed by PATCO militants that the Reagan

administration had received assurances from the AFL-CIO that it would not act to prevent the destruction of PATCO.

Opposing the treachery and cowardice of the AFL-CIO, the Workers League (predecessor organization of the Socialist Equality Party) explained what was at stake in the PATCO strike. In a statement published on August 13, 1981, in the *Bulletin* (forerunner of the *World Socialist Web Site*), the Workers League stated:

The strike by 13,000 members of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization is a historical turning point for the struggle of the working class in the United States and internationally. ...

One political conclusion above all must be drawn from the PATCO strike: far from being an aberration or exception, it reveals the real essence of class relations in the United States.

The ruling class is attacking all the basic rights of workers—social services, jobs, safety regulations, living standards, and now the right to union organization—and calling upon all the repressive powers and violence of the capitalist state to enforce these attacks. [*The PATCO Strike: A Warning to the Working Class*]

The Workers League's statement made four critical points.

First, it stressed that the violent action of the Reagan administration was aimed at implementing a fundamental restructuring of class relations in the United States, i.e., creating the best conditions for a massive increase in the exploitation of the working class and the transfer of wealth to the ruling elite. The destruction of PATCO was a signal for a general offensive by the corporations against all sections of the working class.

Second, it explained that the Reagan administration's attack on workers was aimed at reversing the global economic decline of the United States and weakening the resistance of the international working class to the geostrategic interests of American imperialism.

The attack on the PATCO membership is inseparable from Reagan's policy of global counterrevolution. American capitalism can no longer keep two sets of books, politically speaking, maintaining class compromise at home while pursuing ferocious counterrevolution and establishing and supporting military and fascist dictatorships overseas.

Third, the Workers League warned that the subservience of the AFL-CIO, the UAW, the Teamsters and other labor organizations to capitalism and its two political parties drastically weakened the working class and would lead to one defeat after another.

Fourth, the defense of the working class required the building of a new revolutionary leadership, based on a socialist perspective. The Workers League warned:

The labor bureaucracy will betray, and is betraying. The struggle against these betrayals cannot be based solely on militancy, but requires a political strategy for the struggle against the government.

The analysis made by the Workers League, regarding both the national and international consequences of the betrayal and defeat of the PATCO strike, was confirmed by subsequent events. Within the United States, the

destruction of PATCO was followed by a wave of strike breaking—at Continental Airlines, Phelps Dodge copper mines, Hormel meat processing plants and AT Massey coal mines, to name only the most notorious—that resulted in a devastating decline in the living standards of the American working class.

Beyond the borders of the United States, Reagan's destruction of PATCO encouraged capitalist governments all over the world to escalate their attacks on the working class. British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's brutal defeat of the miners in the 1984–85 strike drew its inspiration from Reagan's actions.

The extreme weakening of the position of the working class in the United States provided new credibility to pro-capitalist propaganda and contributed significantly to the climate of social and political demoralization that enabled the reactionary Stalinist bureaucracies in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and China to carry out the restoration of capitalism between 1989 and 1991.

In the decades that followed the defeats of the 1980s, strikes all but disappeared in the United States. In a country that had witnessed over the course of more than a century the most violent labor battles in the world, virtually all manifestations of class-conscious struggle disappeared.

In this process, the union bureaucracy functioned as the accomplices of the government and the corporations. It repudiated any association with class struggle, fully embraced the program of government-corporate-union collaboration, and accepted the absolute priority of profits over even the minimal defense of workers' interests.

In actual practice, these organizations ceased to be unions. In 1937 Trotsky enumerated the criteria that determined the real social character of an organization that claimed to be a trade union.

The character of a workers' organization such as a trade union is determined by its relation to the distribution of national income. The fact that Green [then president of the American Federation of Labor] and Company defend private property in the means of production characterizes them as bourgeois. Should these gentlemen in addition defend the income of the bourgeoisie from attacks on the part of the workers; should they conduct a struggle against strikes, against the raising of wages, against help to the unemployed; then we would have an organization of scabs, and not a trade union. [Not a Workers' and Not a Bourgeois State?]

Based on the criteria enumerated by Trotsky—opposing strikes, the raising of wages, and help to the unemployed—the AFL-CIO and its affiliated organizations (such as the UAW) cannot be legitimately described as trade unions.

Globalization of capitalism and the renewed upsurge of the working class

In history there is such a thing as retribution. For all the crimes committed by capitalism against the working class over the past 40 years, the ruling class, in the very process of attacking the working class and vastly enriching itself, has overseen a vast expansion and integration of the capitalist system of production. The most significant and revolutionary outcome of this process—driven by staggering advances in science and technology—is the massive growth in the global working class.

The capitalist class within the United States and internationally has been able to exploit the initial stages of this process to its advantage. The

organization of production on a global scale enabled the capitalists to pit the workers of different countries against one another. Confronted with the international strategy and tactics of the employers, the existing trade unions, based on a hopelessly out-of-date nationalist perspective, were incapable of developing an effective counter-strategy. This national provincialism was an even greater factor in the impotence of the trade unions than the personal cowardice and corruption of the trade union bureaucrats.

Nevertheless, however difficult, protracted and painful the process, the American working class is coming to recognize ever more clearly that it is part of a massive global social force, consisting of billions of people. Moreover, the communications technologies that have emerged in recent decades have provided workers with access to invaluable information that enables them to see through the misinformation and outright lies of their treacherous leaders. These technologies have placed at the disposal of workers powerful new weapons in the organization and prosecution of the class struggle. They are now able to contact each other and coordinate their struggles not only beyond their local, regional and national environment. Workers can establish connections, exchange information and initiate actions on a global scale.

The Volvo workers in Dublin, Virginia, are well aware of the fact that the corporation, headquartered in Gothenburg, Sweden, employs almost 100,000 workers in production facilities located in 18 different countries, spanning every continent. Many of these facilities are interdependent, requiring a flow of products from one plant to another. Contrary to the claims of the bureaucracy that resistance to the corporations is hopeless, the workers realize that their potential power, if organized and deployed globally, is immense.

Therefore, the critical issue for the Volvo workers, and the working class as a whole, is that of perspective, program and leadership.

The Socialist Equality Party and the fight for rank-and-file committees

Within ever broader sections of the working class, there is a mounting disgust with, bordering on hatred of, the existing trade unions and the bureaucrats who run them. Workers know that no struggle against the corporations can succeed unless the direction of strikes and the decision-making process is taken out of the control of the self-serving bureaucratic parasites. They realize that they are compelled to wage a struggle on two fronts, against both the corporations and their bribed agents in the apparatus of the pro-corporate trade unions.

In response to the objective development of the class struggle and the growing militancy of the workers, the Socialist Equality Party has been patiently and persistently working in plants and work facilities throughout the country, among the many diverse sections of the working class—from coal miners and autoworkers to teachers, bus drivers and clerical workers—to assist workers in establishing rank-and-file committees, independent and outside of the control of the pro-corporate bureaucracy.

The Socialist Equality Party is conducting this work on the basis of an international strategy.

It is for this reason that we consider the establishment of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), an initiative launched by the International Committee of Fourth International (ICFI), to be essential to the development of the class struggle within the United States.

The aims of the IWA-RFC were formulated precisely in a statement of the ICFI posted on the *World Socialist Web Site* on April 23, 2021:

The IWA-RFC will work to develop the framework for new forms of independent, democratic and militant rank-and-file organizations of workers in factories, schools and workplaces on an international scale. The working class is ready to fight. But it is shackled by reactionary bureaucratic organizations that suppress every expression of resistance.

It will be a means through which workers throughout the world can share information and organize a united struggle to demand protection for workers, the shutdown of unsafe facilities and nonessential production, and other emergency measures that are necessary to stop the spread of the virus.

The ICFI is initiating the formation of this alliance on a global scale, which is the only way that the pandemic can be fought. The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, with the political assistance of the Fourth International and the Socialist Equality Parties, will strive to unify workers in a common worldwide struggle, opposing every effort by capitalist governments and the reactionary proponents of the innumerable forms of national, ethnic and racial chauvinism and identity politics to split up the working class into warring factions.

Naturally, conditions confronting workers vary from region to region and country to country, and these may affect the choice of tactics. But it is undeniably true, in all countries, that the existing bureaucratized trade unions function as an institutionalized police force, determined to protect the corporate and financial interests of the ruling elites and their governments against growing popular resistance.

New pathways for mass struggle must be created. More than 80 years ago, at a point in history when the degeneration of the existing trade union organizations was far less advanced than today, Leon Trotsky—the greatest strategist of world socialist revolution—wrote that the task of the Fourth International was “to create in all possible instances independent militant organizations corresponding more closely to the tasks of mass struggle against bourgeois society, not flinching even in the face of a direct break with the conservative apparatus of the trade unions.”

The development of these committees will inevitably attract the support of broader sections of the working class, including the youth and the unemployed.

The resurgence of working-class militancy is driven not only by conditions that workers confront within their factories and workplaces. Since the beginning of 2020, the entire working class has lived through the nightmare of the COVID-19 pandemic. They have witnessed the sickness and even deaths of family members, friends, workmates and colleagues. Workers have seen the incompetence and callousness of the US government, the refusal of elected officials of both political parties to take effective measures to prevent the spread of disease and save lives, and the grotesque accumulation of obscene levels of wealth within a small and selfish elite while ordinary working people struggle to stay healthy and survive.

Moreover, the pandemic has made them aware of the international dimensions of the crisis and that the pandemic will not be definitively and securely stopped in one country unless it is eradicated in all countries.

The American working class is not frightened of revolution. Nor is it opposed to socialism. It just needs to understand what it offers as a solution and how it can be realized. Just as World War I radicalized an earlier generation of workers and turned them to socialism, the pandemic, which has intensified the crisis of contemporary society, has convinced the working class of the need to search for new answers to the evident failure and injustice of capitalist society.

This is the essential content of the new wave of social militancy,
centered in the working class, that is sweeping across the United States.



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