

Volvo Trucks workers prepare for battle as company cuts off health insurance and brings in strikebreakers

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On Tuesday, the day after nearly 3,000 Volvo Trucks workers walked out for the second time this year, the giant multinational corporation cut off health insurance to workers and their families, brought strikebreakers into the New River Valley (NRV) plant in Dublin, Virginia, and began sending out letters threatening striking workers with termination.

In a brief message posted on the UAW Local 2069 Facebook page, union officials said: “So the company canceled our insurance as of midnight yesterday.” A striking Volvo worker told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the company did not cut off benefits during the two-week strike in April before the United Auto Workers (UAW) abruptly ended the walkout. Volvo did, however, cut health care benefits during the bitter two-month strike in 2008 when workers resisted the introduction of the two-tier wage system, which was accepted by the union.

In 2019, General Motors cut off medical coverage on the first day of a nine-week strike by 48,000 GM workers but was forced to rescind its action because of a public backlash.

“Franky [Marchand, Volvo Trucks vice president and NRV plant manager] put out a statement that he’s cutting off everyone’s insurance immediately,” a young Volvo worker told the WSWs. “So, no more good will and nice guy. We must be getting to them.”

UAW Local 2069 officials simply announced the cutoff without even a verbal protest over the stripping of health care benefits from strikers and their families in the midst of a pandemic. Similarly, the UAW International said nothing. In a brief note, Local 2069 officials informed workers: “You are now on Cobra thru UAW if you signed up last time you will not need to sign up again.”

COBRA, the 1985 Consolidated Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act, is a US law which allows workers to extend their employer-provided health insurance after it is terminated. While the UAW indicates on its website that the strike fund will cover the insurance premium payments under COBRA, they state that they restrict this to only

“certain benefits such as medical and prescription drugs.” They continue: “Benefits not covered include: dental, vision, hearing and sick and accident.”

“The union should give us full benefits,” a Volvo worker said. “We’ve been paying union dues for years for the UAW to take care of us in times like these. It’s like paying for car insurance, and when you get in a wreck, they say, ‘Ok, you’ve blown out four tires, but we’re only going to pay for two.’ You tell them I need four tires to drive on, and they say, ‘Sorry, it’s not our problem.’”

Another striker added, “The UAW should pick up the payments for full coverage and pay for it out of its nearly \$800 million strike fund.”

Workers have also reported that Volvo began to bring in management personnel and nonunion workers on Tuesday morning to complete work on stockpiled trucks. “The company is now hoping scabs will cross the picket line to work down their float of 2,000 trucks that are sitting all over the county unlocked and vulnerable,” the young worker said. “We have leverage, and it would be an act of unmitigated stupidity not to use it to its fullest extent.”

In a post on the Local 2069 Facebook page Tuesday, UAW officials told workers that they can do nothing more than watch the strikebreakers cross their lines, writing: “The State Police has informed us to not block the entrances of the plant. We do not want to see anyone get in trouble and we want law enforcement to stay neutral in this process.”

Both the UAW and the AFL-CIO are opposed to mobilizing the thousands of workers from Volvo and the surrounding area to carry out mass picketing to stop the strikebreaking, because it would quickly escalate into a confrontation with their ally, Virginia’s Democratic Governor Ralph Northam.

Northam’s troopers are not “neutral.” As in every strike, the police are deployed to protect the profit interests of the corporations and enforce injunctions issued by company-controlled judges. During the 1989-90 Pittston strike,

Virginia Democratic Governor Doug Wilder deployed hundreds of state troopers across the coalfields to escort scabs and arrest striking miners.

On Sunday, Volvo workers rejected by 90 percent a second attempt by the union to push through a pro-company contract. The UAW had shut down a two-week strike on April 30 before attempting to push through the sellout deal the first time, which was also voted down by workers by 90 percent. Following the second defeat of the deal last Sunday, the UAW felt it had no choice but to sanction a renewal of the strike, which began Monday at noon.

“Even if our Bargaining Team won’t hold the line and bring back the contract we deserve, 90-91 percent of the membership showed that THEY will, twice,” a Volvo worker told the WSWS.

Workers have returned to the picket lines determined to wage a serious fight to recover more than a decade of wage and benefits concessions accepted by the UAW, particularly now that the Sweden-based corporation is making billions in profits and paying its investors record high dividends. The union, however, has made it clear it has no intention of carrying out a real struggle.

Union officials have not issued any demands on the company. On the contrary, UAW Secretary-Treasurer Ray Curry, who is leading negotiations, said in a letter to Volvo management that his goal was to achieve a contract that “works both for the Company and its employees.” This only underscores that the union has no intention of fighting for workers’ demands to reverse substantial concessions pushed through by the union in earlier contracts, such as the multitier wage and benefit system, let alone win substantial improvements. Such gains would certainly hurt Volvo’s bottom line, and that is why the UAW executives are bitterly opposed to them.

The Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee, which has led the opposition to the UAW sellout contracts, issued a statement Tuesday titled “No Health Care? No Negotiations!”

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

Denouncing Volvo’s provocation, the statement says: “Fellow workers, this attack on health care directly threatens all of us and our families. In the context of a deadly pandemic, it is a dagger aimed at the heart of all working people.

“The company,” the statement says, “is determined to fight, and we must show greater determination. It is impossible to win a war if we concede every battle.” Until health care is restored, the statement says, the “UAW must cover the full costs of complete health care for all workers.

The \$790 million strike fund must not be used to cover the resort vacations, extravagant meals or the massive legal fees of bureaucratic bribe-takers. The strike fund is our money, to be used for our benefit, for our struggle.”

The struggle can and must be won. In developing the struggle, workers must understand they confront a war on two fronts. One front consists of the giant corporation and both big business parties, the courts and the police. The other is the UAW, which has a strategy not to win the strike but to defeat it.

Workers need their own strategy. This includes the demand for the withdrawal of the UAW bargaining committee and rank-and-file oversight of negotiations, full income for striking workers paid by the UAW and mass picketing to prevent scab operations.

At the same time, the New River Valley workers cannot fight this battle alone. What is required is the mobilization of Volvo workers across the company’s vast empire, from Mack Trucks workers in Pennsylvania, Maryland and Virginia, to the company’s operations in Sweden, France, Belgium, Russia, Brazil, India and Thailand. In addition to mobilizing other Volvo workers, the victory of the strike requires that it link up with other ongoing struggles, including the Warrior Met coal miners in Alabama, Vale Inco nickel miners in Ontario, Canada, and Allegheny Technologies steelworkers in Pennsylvania and other states.

General Motors, Ford and Stellantis workers in Detroit and other cities, who have repeatedly rebelled against the same UAW executives, have a particular duty to come to the aid of the Volvo workers and prepare joint action.

The VWRFC has insisted that workers will not return to work without winning their minimum demands, including a 25 percent pay raise, an end to the tier system, no Alternative Work Schedule, five personal days for everyone, a \$4,000 signing bonus, no increase in health care costs and full funding of retiree health care without premiums or co-pays.

Volvo and Mack workers can contact the VWRFC at volvowrfc@gmail.com or text to (540) 307-0509.



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