

Anger grows among Volvo Trucks workers over UAW attempts to sabotage strike

Marcus Day
9 June 2021

The global heavy-truck maker Volvo is ratcheting up its attempts to crush the strike and incipient rebellion by nearly 3,000 manufacturing workers at its New River Valley (NRV) plant in southwestern Virginia. On Sunday, workers courageously voted down and defied a second United Auto Workers-backed sellout contract by 90 percent.

Volvo brought in vans full of scabs on Wednesday, workers reported to the *World Socialist Web Site*. “At the main entrance they brought in 10-12 black vans full of people,” said Sam, a worker at the plant whose name has been changed to protect him from retaliation.

There is a growing recognition among workers that the UAW is deliberately undermining the strike, enabling the company’s scabbing operations to proceed. Since the second walkout began Monday, the UAW ordered workers to retreat away from roads into the plant and allow strikebreakers to pass, as well as limiting the size of pickets. “There were signs up everywhere at the union hall saying that you are not to stop any vehicle,” Sam said. “They posted too that if you cause a disturbance, you will be removed by state police.”

However, a number of the pictures of the picket lines on Facebook Wednesday showed large groups of workers standing in the roads, ignoring the UAW’s commands.

UAW Local 2069 reported Wednesday that the company will be sending out termination letters, claiming that “this is a normal part of the process.” The local had reported Tuesday that the company had cut off workers’ health care coverage, a provocative and aggressive action that the union gave no indication of opposing.

Later in the day Wednesday, workers responded angrily when Local 2069 announced on Facebook that strike paychecks “should be” available June 21. “We waited two weeks last time [but] we never ended the strike you just made us go back to work why do we have to wait again?” one worker commented, referring to the union’s unilateral shutdown of the first two-week walkout on April 30. The UAW doles out only a miserable \$275 a week in pay, less than the federal minimum wage, from its \$790 million strike fund.

The cutoff of health benefits and the pittance being issued in strike pay have been denounced in statements circulated by the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee. The committee, which workers have said was the catalyst for opposition to the UAW’s first two sellout agreements, has demanded that there be no new negotiations until health coverage is reinstated, and that strike pay be immediately increased to cover workers’ full income.

Fearful of the growing rebellion among the rank and file and feeling itself under siege, the UAW is working with a definite strategy to isolate and hamstring workers. If anything, it is now seeking to force through an even worse contract than the first two pro-company deals.

Workers told the WSWs that they believe they are being punished by the UAW for voting down its pro-company contracts by 90 percent two times. In both cases, the agreement would have raised health care costs, maintained the hated multi-tier pay and benefit system, entailed an effective cut in real wages, ended the eight-hour day, and placed retirees’ health benefits in jeopardy.

In an obviously vindictive move, on Wednesday the UAW told workers, including those who are older and may have health problems, that they may not bring chairs to sit while at the picket.

“Some older fellows brought lounge chairs and the UAW said they had to stand at all times,” Sam said. “They told the strike captain ‘screw you, we are not going to stand the entire time.’” Workers said the order to not bring lounge chairs to the pickets came from Local 2069 President Matt Blondino himself.

Blondino gave a brief interview to a local CBS affiliate that was aired on Tuesday. If the appearance was meant to save face among workers, it had the opposite effect. “He appeared too scared to say anything, that’s what everyone says,” Sam said. He added that workers felt that if he had so little to say about their struggle, that means “he can’t be fighting for us.”

While the *World Socialist Web Site* has been publishing multiple daily reports on the walkout, bringing the struggle

to workers' attention both in the US and internationally, the strike has been virtually blacked out from the national media in the US, with coverage largely confined to local news outlets. The *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* have published no articles on the latest strike as of this writing, and the *Washington Post* carried only a short reprint of an Associated Press report Monday morning.

The media silence reflects a deepening unease among the corporate and political establishment, as well as among the well-paid executives who run the trade union apparatus on their behalf. Neither the UAW nor the AFL-CIO, the main trade union federation in the US, has posted information about the strike on their websites, nor have they done anything to inform their members about it.

There can be little doubt that both Volvo and the UAW have been in discussion with Virginia's Democratic Party-led state government and the Biden administration since Sunday's humiliating defeat of the union-company contract. Since coming into office, Biden and the Democrats have sought to shore up the position of the unions, seeing in them a bulwark against the rising tide of working-class anger. Biden lent his support to the unionization drive at the Amazon warehouse in Bessemer, Alabama, which was rejected by a two-to-one margin by workers, who were overwhelmingly alienated from the campaign.

The White House also has initiated a pro-union task force, composed of top national security and economic policy cabinet members. The task force is holding virtual "listening sessions" with union leaders through the end of the week, discussing policies the union heads hope to see implemented by the Biden administration, according to *Bloomberg Law*.

The capitalist state is seeking to strengthen the grip of the unions over workers and integrate them more closely into its strategic discussions in the hopes of heading off a looming social explosion. Throughout the United States and in other countries, there has been an initial upsurge in strikes this year against declining pay and working conditions, as well as the deadly impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. In each case, workers have immediately come into collision with the pro-corporate unions, which have worked to isolate walkouts, cripple their effectiveness, and disarm workers in the face of increasingly vicious attacks by the companies.

At Warrior Met Coal in Alabama, where miners have been on strike since the end of March and voted down a United Mine Workers-backed deal by 1,006 to 45 in April, a growing number of picketers have been hit by strikebreakers' cars. Tenet Healthcare has been hiring permanent replacement workers and increasingly terminating striking nurses at the St. Vincent Hospital in Worcester, Massachusetts. And the United Steelworkers has kept a series of workers' struggles isolated from each other,

including striking ATI steelworkers in several states and nickel miners for Vale Inco in Canada, as well as locked-out ExxonMobil oil refinery workers in Beaumont, Texas.

The critical task for workers in each of these struggles is to break out of the artificial separation imposed by the unions, unify their forces, and mobilize far broader sections of the working class, both in the US and internationally. But for this unification to happen, a network of new organizations is required, made up of rank-and-file committees like the one formed by Volvo Trucks workers.

There is a powerful reservoir of desire in the working class for unity and a collective fight to finally put an end to the decades-long corporate assault.

A worker for Mack Trucks (which is also owned by Sweden-based Volvo Group) in Allentown, Pennsylvania, told the WSWs that workers at his plant were following the strike at NRV closely and wanted to give their support. Addressing himself to striking workers, he said, "If we were all together and shut down Allentown, Hagerstown, Maryland and the other plants, that would really hurt Volvo. We are in the same boat and should be under the same contract. Volvo keeps making money and we keep giving up contract after contract.

"Our contract comes up in two years, and we support you guys and want you to get better than we did in 2019. We were on the picket line, and I hated that we were only paid \$275, while the UAW has all that money in the strike fund. Everybody is paying attention here and wants you to get what you need.

"The cabs for our day trucks and Mack Anthem trucks are painted at NRV. The Hagerstown plant makes engines for us here and at NRV. We don't want to handle anything coming from NRV during the strike, but we have to be unified so management can't suspend or fire us.

"The UAW shop chair, the president of the local are all against a rank-and-file committee but we need one at our plant too. I say to the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee: stay strong and fight for what the workers deserve."

Volvo and Mack workers can contact the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee at volvowrfc@gmail.com or by text to (540) 307-0509.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact