One week in: Where does the Volvo strike stand?

Eric London
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The second strike this year by nearly 3,000 truck manufacturing workers in Virginia against the transnational corporation Volvo Group has completed its first week, and it is time for workers to unroll the battle maps on the table, survey both their enemy's position and their own, and strategize their next moves.

The position of the company

Volvo is no doubt displeased and nervous that a second strike has begun. The general manager of the company's New River Valley plant, Franky Marchand, declared: "It is difficult to understand this action."

The company had been relying on the United Auto Workers to force through a concessionary contract, but the UAW failed in its assigned task because the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee (VWRFC) gave a voice and leadership to the growing movement among workers for independent action against the UAW-Volvo alliance.

Volvo has told shareholders that it has massive backorders to fill as demand for trucks surges worldwide, and the company's CEO Martin Lundstedt stated in April that "our inventories of both new and used trucks globally are low."

This low inventory evidently remains the case today. On June 10, Volvo issued a layoff notice to Mack Trucks workers in Hagerstown, Maryland, slated for next week.

The layoff notice explains that the "continuing impact [of] supply chain restraints" have forced temporary layoffs on Monday, June 14 for two shifts of Convention Production. The statement acknowledges, "Although severe supply shortages continue to create a tough situation in the plant, demand for our products remains strong and *we have a large backlog of trucks to build for our customers*." (Emphasis added).

A worker at the Hagerstown plant told the *World Socialist Web Site* that there is a growing mood within the plant to come to the support of their brothers and sisters across the Maryland state line: "This fight is for everyone. It has already happened at the powertrain plant. They cut two days production and more."

Volvo undoubtedly discussed the Hagerstown layoffs with the union at the plant, but the UAW withheld this critical information of the company's vulnerability from striking workers at the New River Valley plant. Any organization that actually defended the interests of workers would have told those on strike that the company had just admitted its Mack truck inventory was low.

Volvo has a lot to lose, but that does not mean workers can defeat a massive transnational company with a strike at just one plant. David may have defeated Goliath in the Book of Samuel, but the corporate Goliaths of the global capitalist economy have plants on all continents and control complex global supply chains. They are powerful enough to shift production to minimize the impact of a strike, no matter how courageous the workers at an individual factory may be.

The role of the UAW

The UAW knows that workers will not achieve their demands to end the tier system and significantly raise wages on the basis of a walkout at one plant, and that's precisely why their strategy is to isolate the strike. Workers are kept on a measly $275 a week while hundreds of UAW bureaucrats receive full pay for doing nothing but conveying the orders of the companies they

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represent. Workers in Michigan, Illinois, Indiana and all across the country tell the *World Socialist Web Site* that the UAW has not said a word about the Virginia strike.

The corporate media is trying to pretend the strike isn't happening. A whole network of publications that call themselves pro-worker have also ignored the second strike, including *Jacobin*, the *Nation*, and *Left Voice*.

The UAW executives have a financial interest in defeating the strike so that they can continue collecting payoffs from the corporations and getting rich off of the dues money of the workers they sell out. On Thursday, former UAW President Gary Jones—who was president of the UAW when it sold out the 2019 strikes at Mack Truck and General Motors—was sentenced to 28 months in federal prison for embezzling up to $1.5 million in union funds to finance golf trips, private Palms Springs, California villas, and lavish meals for top UAW executives.

One striking Virginia Volvo worker told the WSWS, "Two years is nothing. Look at Bernie Madoff. Jones ruins people's lives making deals that never should have been made." In fact, Jones will have been released before the six-year deal the UAW tried to force through is even a third of the way complete.

The worker said the WSWS article on Jones' sentencing "had a big response" among strikers. "It's like everybody knows that they are fighting against the people that are leading the strike. We have to keep telling them to piss off. No confidence in the leadership."

Another worker on strike said of Jones' light sentencing, "It just blows my mind. Basically, he stole from everybody, and it wasn't just my money, but all UAW members' money. A few years back we paid two hours a month [in dues], then they upped it to two and a half hours. This is what they've done with my money."

As a matter of fact, if the UAW had succeeded in ramming its six-year sellout contract down Volvo workers' throats, Jones would have gotten out of prison when the contract had more than four years left, even making the very doubtful assumption that he will serve the full sentence. And with 5 percent per year inflation, a 12 percent wage increase for the top of the pay scale over six years would have in fact been a massive pay *cut*, taking into account a 30 percent increase in cost of living over that term.

Workers have to approach the situation soberly. They know the outcome of this strike will have a long-term impact on their lives and the lives of their children and grandchildren.

Workers confront not just Volvo but an entire financial aristocracy which is deeply invested in the Swedish company and in the outcome of the strike. Institutional investors own 60 percent of Volvo's stock, including investment firms and mutual funds like Sweden's Industrivärden (170,200,000 shares, valued at roughly $195 million) and Swedbank Robur (63,556,098, $73 million); and the US' BlackRock (96,766,082 shares, $111 million), and Vanguard (which owns 39,854,665 shares, $45 million). In total, 51 percent of Volvo shares are owned by just 25 incredibly powerful capitalist shareholders.

Workers are engaged in a fight against a strong opponent, but they have even more powerful allies.

The problem is that the "unions" such as the UAW and others are attempting to keep their millions of members in the dark about the strike at Volvo in order to prevent them from joining forces. But there are 100,000 Volvo workers in the US and internationally who are eager to jump in to help, hundreds of teachers who teach the strikers' children, and many more across all industries who stand to gain from the success of the Volvo workers' struggle. This includes the many millions who are tied to the plant by the process of production, including parts workers in Mexico, truckers who drive the trucks to the dealerships, dockworkers who load the trucks for export, and so on.

These allies, regardless of their nationality, ethnicity, skin color or religion, are the social force which must come to the defense of Virginia Volvo workers if their strike is to be successful. Rank-and-file committees are the mechanism for breaking the isolation and the silence and calling these reinforcements into battle.

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

The position of the workers

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