

Volvo workers' open letter to the UAW: “What is your strategy for victory?”

The Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee
14 June 2021

The following is an open letter from the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee (VWRFC) at the New River Valley Plant in Dublin, Virginia, to UAW International President Rory Gamble, UAW Secretary-Treasurer Ray Curry and UAW Local 2069 President Matt Blondino. Volvo and Mack workers can contact the VWRFC at volvwrfc@gmail.com or text to (540) 307-0509?.

An Open Letter to UAW International President Rory Gamble, UAW Secretary-Treasurer Ray Curry and UAW Local 2069 President Matt Blondino

June 14, 2021

To Rory Gamble, Ray Curry and Matt Blondino:

On Monday, June 7, the UAW International called us, the workers of the Volvo Trucks New River Valley plant, out on strike for the second time in two months. The strike followed our rejection of the second tentative agreement with Volvo that you brought back for a vote. We rejected both the first and second tentative agreements by an overwhelming margin—90 to 91 percent.

We have now been on the picket lines for one week, but you have not told rank-and-file workers what the union is fighting for, how the next agreement will differ from the previous two and how the UAW intends to win this strike.

We, the rank-and-file workers of Volvo NRV, demand answers to the following questions:

1. What are your demands in negotiations with Volvo?

We want to know precisely what you are asking from Volvo. So far, we have only heard that, in the words of Ray Curry, you are committed to an agreement that “works for both the Company and its employees.”

But if there were an agreement that “works” for both the company and the workers, there would be no strike. Volvo wants to continue handing out billions to its investors and executives. After decades of concessions, we want decent pay, health care and security for retirees.

The US Consumer Price Index, the measure of annual inflation, rose to 5 percent last month. This means that our annual wages must increase by 5 percent just to keep pace with the rising costs of food, gas, clothing and other basic necessities. The last contract we rejected raised wages for top pay an average of only 2 percent a year, meaning that both core group workers and all those who eventually reach the top of the wage scale would be losing substantial amounts of money.

Curry added that there are “many topics” that are unresolved, including “wage increases, job security, wage progression, skilled trades, shift premiums, holiday schedules, health and safety, seniority, pension, 401(k), healthcare and prescription drug coverage and overtime.” That is, everything that you accepted in the previous agreements! But the devil is

in the details, and Curry said nothing about what the UAW is now proposing.

Therefore, tell us: What, precisely, is your plan for wages? Are you demanding a cost-of-living clause to meet inflation? What are you proposing to do to end the multi-tier wage and benefit system and maintain the eight-hour day? What are you doing to secure the interests of retirees?

2. Why are you paying only \$275 a week in strike pay?

The leadership of Local 2069 has said that we will be receiving only \$275 in strike pay, and that checks “should” be available June 21. You know that we cannot live on this income, which does not even meet the federal poverty level. And on top of this, we have had our health care cut off by the company, and the UAW is only covering the most minimal services, with many of us not able to get our prescription costs covered because of a supposed “system crash.”

Livable strike pay is not just a matter of economic survival. It is necessary to show the company that we are prepared to fight.

This isn't the 1930s. The UAW is not a hardscrabble operation. It is a massive institution with immense resources. The strike fund alone stands at three-quarters of a billion dollars. The International is staffed by a gigantic bureaucracy, whose members are lavishly overcompensated. We know from the UAW's 2020 filings with the Department of Labor that last year's official payroll at the national headquarters exceeded \$80 million.

There are 17 UAW officials who make more than \$200,000 a year, and *more than 450* who make more than \$100,000. The average weekly income for the UAW national staff is over \$2,300 per week, *more than eight times what we are getting in strike pay*.

Also listed on the payroll are officers whose income is listed under “political activities and lobbying.” Vast resources are spent by the UAW funding Democratic politicians, including Biden. But how exactly have we benefited from any of this? The Democrats claim they are “pro-worker,” but it doesn't seem to us that anything changes whether it is the Democrats or Republicans in power. Here in Virginia, it is a Democratic governor and friend of Franky Marchand, Ralph Northam, who is instructing the police to help the company bring in scab workers to break our strike.

Moreover, the UAW spent \$2.3 million in legal fees in 2019 to defend corrupt officials guilty of stealing our dues money in exchange for pushing through pro-company contracts.

We can't help but note, Rory Gamble, that you owe your current position to the fact that two of your predecessors, Dennis Williams and Gary Jones, are now (or about to be) in prison. Jones was just sentenced for siphoning off workers' dues money to pay for lavish meals and, among other things, \$60,000 in cigars for UAW bureaucrats (equivalent to the weekly strike pay for 218 workers).

The UAW also spent more than \$6 million last year to refurbish “Solidarity House” in Detroit. This sum is nearly the same as two months strike pay for all 2,900 of us at \$275 a week. It spent an additional \$3.5

million on building up its offices in Illinois and Washington D.C.

Excuse us, but you seem to have your priorities all wrong. Rather than spending money on refurbishing your offices on Jefferson Avenue in Detroit and providing a privileged lifestyle for hundreds of bureaucrats, the resources of the UAW, built up with *our dues money*, must be used to sustain our strike.

3. What is your strategy for victory?

This brings us to the most important question: What is the strategy to win this strike? Volvo has a strategy for victory and is prepared for a battle. Not only has the company cut off our health care, but it also is using the police to bring in scab workers and keep operations running. It is a multinational corporation with annual revenues of more than \$40 billion. It knows that if we are starved out on the picket line for a sufficient length of time, we will be forced to accept what it is demanding.

But the company is also very vulnerable. Volvo has told its shareholders that it is low on inventory for new trucks. It is forcing through temporary layoffs at the Hagerstown Mack plant due to a shortage of supplies, and workers there have told us that there is strong sentiment for a united fight against the company.

The strength of a strike lies in the ability of workers, through united action, to inflict significant economic and political damage on the company. So what is your strategy? What are you doing to undermine Volvo operations here in the US, including at the Volvo Mack truck plants in Salem, Virginia; Hagerstown, Maryland; and Allentown, Pennsylvania, where we know the strike has enormous support?

The UAW has 400,000 members in the US, Canada and Puerto Rico. It is affiliated with the AFL-CIO, which has more than 12.5 million members. What is being done to mobilize these workers, who face the same issues we do?

In this context, we note that the UAW International Facebook page has not even posted a notice about our struggle. We have been told by workers at other plants, including workers represented by the UAW, that they do not even know that we are on strike.

Volvo, moreover, is an international corporation, with tens of thousands of workers in Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America. Yet you are making no effort to contact and inform workers throughout the world of our struggle.

You claim to be our representatives, yet we see that on every front your actions are undermining our strike.

Matt Blondino says that the strike will continue until an agreement is ratified. Given that you have told us nothing about what you are proposing that is different from the agreements we have rejected, this seems more a threat against us than the company. You are telling us that we will remain isolated and starved on the picket lines until we accept what we have already rejected.

We are not going to sit by and let this happen! We are not going to let Volvo, with your collaboration, try to teach us a lesson and punish us for voting down your contracts twice.

For the last 40 years, since the concessions to Chrysler granted by the UAW president at the time, Douglas Fraser, in 1979, every contract has involved massive and unrecovered givebacks to the companies by the UAW. In the past, this was justified by the need to “save” the company. Now the concessions continue even when these corporations are making massive profits, as with Volvo.

We have presented our questions, now here are our demands:

First, we demand to know, in detail, what you are proposing. We reiterate here the minimum demands that we outlined in our open letter of May 20, which you chose to ignore:

- Immediate 25 percent across-the-board pay raise to restore income lost over the last three contracts, plus a 6 percent per year wage increase
- An additional COLA escalator clause to raise wages in line with the soaring prices of consumer goods

- Maintain current health insurance rates and coverage
 - Fully paid health care benefits for retirees, with no co-pays or premiums
- End the multi-tier wage system and transfer all workers to top-tier pay and benefits
- Eliminate the Alternative Work Schedule, maintain the eight-hour day, and keep current overtime rules
- Five personal days for all workers, not just salary workers
- A \$4,000 contract ratification bonus

Second, we demand that the UAW mobilize all of its members in support of this strike, beginning with the shutdown of all Volvo operations in the US. The UAW should also appeal directly for support from workers at Volvo facilities throughout the world. We know from our own discussions with workers that when they know about our strike, they are eager to support it and join the struggle.

Third, we demand open negotiations. Nothing good happens in secret. All discussions with the company must be supervised by a representative of the rank-and-file workers. We will not accept *another* contract hatched behind our backs. There must be mass membership meetings at least twice a week with an open mic so that all of us have the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered.

Fourth, we demand full income for all workers on strike, beginning immediately, paid for by the UAW strike fund built up with our union dues. We will not be starved on the picket line while you conspire with the company to impose a deal even worse than the ones we rejected.

Fifth, we will not accept another attempt to force a contract through with lies and threats.

Any new agreement must be provided in full to all workers with two weeks for us to review and discuss before a vote. The strike must continue until we have achieved our demands, and we will not accept you calling it off without our approval like you did last time.

We are demanding that a line be drawn in the sand, that this strike result in a clear victory for workers. If they are informed about our struggle, workers throughout the country and indeed around the world will understand that it is in the interests of all workers. They will understand that this is a strike not only for us, but for the future. A successful struggle here at Volvo will strengthen every autoworker, and in fact the entire working class.

If you are not prepared to carry out such a fight, then get out. The rank-and-file will elect a bargaining and strike committee of its own that is prepared to carry out the struggle that is required.

We demand an answer.

Yours Sincerely,

The Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact