

“We are fighting both the company and the UAW”

Volvo Trucks workers start third week of strike in Virginia

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21 June 2021

Today marks the beginning of the third week of the strike by 2,900 Volvo Trucks workers at the New River Valley factory in Dublin, Virginia. Workers at the Swedish multinational’s largest truck-making facility have rejected two agreements pushed by the United Auto Workers (UAW) and are determined to win substantial improvements and overturn more than a decade of givebacks by the UAW.

According to UAW and company officials, formal negotiations are set to resume on Wednesday in Charlotte, North Carolina. In letters to the striking workers late last week, UAW Treasury-Secretary and chief negotiator Ray Curry and UAW Local 2069 President Matt Blondino said the UAW would negotiate for a “fair contract.” Neither would say, however, what demands, if any, the UAW would make, and how their next deal would be any different from the two previous agreements workers voted down by 90-91 percent.

The “talks” between the UAW and Volvo will not be between two antagonistic parties. On the contrary, they will be between two business entities, which are equally determined to beat back the resistance of workers and impose a labor deal that will be mutually beneficial to the corporation and the corrupt executives who run the UAW.

Far from advancing a strategy to win the strike, the UAW is deliberately isolating the Volvo workers, putting them on starvation rations of \$275 per week in strike benefits, and imposing a news blackout to conceal the strike from other UAW members and prevent them from coming to the aid of the Volvo workers.

In this strike, however, workers have already formed the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee (VWRFC) to counter the sabotage and lies of the UAW and fight to mobilize all Volvo workers and broader sections of the working class to break the isolation of the strike.

“We’ve been on strike for a couple of weeks, and we are sticking together for a long strike,” a member of the VWRFC told the WSWS. “It’s not just Volvo. We’re fighting the UAW too. That’s the hard part. We’re fighting them both. We have been trying to anticipate what their next attack will be and come up with our own answer before they can attack.

“The last three contracts the UAW negotiated were really bad. Workers who were rehired after being laid off took a \$6-7 an hour pay cut under the 2008 deal, which introduced the two-tier wage system. It’s taken 15 years for some workers to finally get into the top-tier Core Group and now they are trying to reset the pay scale again. The UAW said we wouldn’t have two tiers anymore. But under their proposal workers hired after 2011 would top out at \$27 an hour and the Core Group, hired before, would top out at \$31.”

“It will take six years before post-2011 hires get top pay, which will be \$3-4 less than Core workers,” another striker and Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee member told the WSWS. “The UAW didn’t listen to our demands to get rid of the wage tiers and bring everybody up sooner. Now we’re here and we’re losing even more stuff. The pay is not enough to cover the rising cost of living, and workers are not reaching top pay fast enough, or ever.”

The last thing the UAW wants is for Volvo workers to win substantial gains after overwhelmingly rejecting two previous deals. This would open the floodgates not only for truck and auto industry workers but millions of workers to launch a counteroffensive to recoup decades of wage and benefit cuts, which have enriched the corporate and financial elites, and their servants in the trade union bureaucracy.

After an uproar from workers over the UAW’s announcement that it would not begin issuing strike checks until Monday, June 21 [two weeks into the strike and after an earlier two-week strike in April when workers received no benefits], Local 2069 officials said last Friday, “The checks arrived unexpectedly this afternoon. We are getting everything together and will start giving them out today, 6/18 from 6pm-10pm.”

Over the weekend, workers on the picket line confronted local union officials and demanded that the union increase the strike pay that it was paying out of the \$790 million UAW Strike and Defense Fund. Union officials claimed his was impossible and any increase would first have to be approved by a UAW constitutional convention, which will not meet again until June 2022.

This is nothing but self-serving nonsense from an organization whose top leaders repeatedly used union dues to fund golf trips and luxury villas in Palm Springs, California and other resorts. Moreover, the UAW constitutional conventions—which are stacked with yes-men for the top UAW execs—have repeatedly voted to divert hundreds of millions from the strike fund for “administrative” and other dubious purposes.

The strike has already impacted production at Mack-Volvo facilities in Hagerstown, Maryland and Allentown, Pennsylvania. Workers at the Hagerstown plant, who build engines and transmissions from vehicles assembled at the New River Valley plant, told the WSWS that a notice of a temporary layoff “offering” was issued for July 5-23.

Curry and the UAW, which sold out the 2019 strike by 3,500 Mack-Volvo workers, are adamantly opposed to joint action by all Volvo workers. Commenting on the betrayals of the UAW, one Hagerstown worker told the WSWS, “The International leadership has so undermined the rights and abilities of the union worker for their personal ill-gotten gain. We should have never gone back to work with a contract that absolutely didn’t have a union workers’ best interest at heart.” He said UAW officials rammed through the 2019 contract with threats that the company would shut the plant and move its operations if workers did not accept more givebacks. “It’s not hard to see the agenda; the company is slowly phasing out the union wage for temporary workers. We have taken so many concessions in the years to make sure Volvo is profitable that it has become a nonstop waterfall of losses to the workforce!”

The *World Socialist Web Site* is actively fighting to break the conspiracy of silence about the strike by the UAW and the corporate media and inform autoworkers and other workers in the US and internationally about this critical struggle.

A WSWS campaign team visited Stellantis’s Jefferson North Assembly Plant in Detroit on Saturday, where workers produce Jeep Cherokees and Dodge Durangos, and distributed copies of the open letter to the UAW.

When the WSWS explained that workers in Virginia had voted a contract down twice and formed a committee to stop the UAW from selling out their strike, multiple workers said, “Now that’s an interesting idea.” The UAW had not told them about the strike, the workers said.

One young worker asked, “Are you guys with the union?” When the WSWS campaigner said, they were not affiliated with the UAW, the worker said, “Oh, that’s good. This union hasn’t done a thing for us.” She backed her car up and took a leaflet. Some workers said they had already heard of the Volvo strike because they had read it in the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*.

After reading the open letter, a Ford Chicago Assembly worker told the WSWS: “Every UAW member should see this. I am very much impressed with the demands. That’s the way it should be. The UAW at Ford in Chicago only looks out for who

they choose to. The UAW and the company are not giving the members what we should have already. That article should be in the hands of every UAW member.”

Workers in India, Germany, the United Kingdom, Turkey, Sri Lanka and other countries have also issued statements of support, which Volvo workers say have boosted their determination to win this battle. Addressing himself to the Volvo strikers, a worker from the General Motors manufacturing complex in Silao, Mexico said, “Let’s go, fellow workers. We are fighting against giants. Do not falter. The bigger the opponent, the harder he falls. Let’s think of the future for our children—let’s not leave them this filth. We are growing; united we’ll make the change.”

During the 2019 GM strike in the US, Silao GM workers defied the pro-company CTM (Confederation of Mexican Workers) union and refused to work overtime in solidarity with their brothers and sister across the border. For taking this courageous stand, the Detroit automaker fired several workers with the blessing of the CTM. In response, GM and other workers in the US and Canada denounced the firings, donated money to assist the victimized workers and called for the unity of workers against the multinational corporations.

“We can see that so many workers in the US and around the world are supporting our struggle,” a striking Volvo worker told the WSWS. “Their statements and the photos of autoworkers in Detroit holding up signs saying, ‘I support the Volvo workers,’ has boosted morale and made a real difference. I hope we can help each other, and other striking workers like the Alabama miners. Generations of workers are unfamiliar with strikes and everywhere the union officials say, ‘this is the best we can get,’ from corporations making billions. They get their marching orders to take our wages and healthcare benefits. They act like billionaires on pedestals and think we should bow down to them. But what we’re saying now, is we are done with that.”



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