

# Who is Ray Curry?: A profile of the UAW secretary-treasurer and chief conspirator against the Volvo Trucks strikers

Jerry White  
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Volvo Trucks workers in Dublin, Virginia, on strike since June 7, have described their fight as a “two-front war.” The 2,900 striking workers are battling the giant Swedish multinational, which is carrying out a global cost-cutting drive even as it pays out billions in dividends to its wealthy investors this weekend. The workers are also fighting the United Auto Workers (UAW), which has colluded with Volvo to slash labor costs by 25 percent over the last three contracts and would have rammed through another pro-company deal if not for the determined resistance of rank-and-file workers.

In his first public comments in more than a week, Ray Curry, the UAW secretary-treasurer and head of the UAW Heavy Truck Department, issued a perfunctory letter to striking workers last Thursday. In it he declares that the UAW is seeking a “fair and equitable agreement,” without giving any details of what the union is demanding that would make the next proposal any different from the two previous ones rejected by Volvo workers. “The membership is our top priority, and a new agreement remains our objective for the membership of UAW Local 2069,” he declared.

A review of Ray Curry’s record, however, makes it clear that the needs of Volvo workers will not be his or the UAW’s “top priority” when negotiations resume Wednesday.

As secretary-treasurer, Curry is the UAW’s second-in-command and is expected to take over the presidency when current UAW President Rory Gamble retires. Curry is a creature of the UAW apparatus, without the slightest connection to the real conditions and struggles of autoworkers.

In 1992, after a three-year stint at a US Army base in Germany, Curry, then 27, was hired as a truck assembler at the Freightliner plant in Mt. Holly, North Carolina, owned by German multinational Daimler AG. During the next 12 years, mostly spent as a quality assurance inspector, he rose through the ranks of UAW Local 5285 before being selected by the UAW International for higher-paid positions at the regional and national level.

According to a biographical sketch on the website of UAW Region 8, from 1998 through 2004 Curry held “a variety of leadership positions to include UAW Constitutional Convention Delegate, Chairman of the Trustees, Financial Secretary Treasurer and Alternate Committeeperson. Further, he served the UAW and state of North Carolina Labor as UAW State Political Action Committee (PAC) Chairman, North Carolina AFL-CIO Executive Board Vice President, and UAW Member Organizer on the 2003 and 2004 Freightliner Organizing Drives in Cleveland, Gastonia, and High Point, North Carolina. Last, Ray was elected as a Democratic National Convention (DNC) Alternate Delegate for the 2012 DNC National Convention on behalf of the state of Tennessee of which he later became a Full Voting Delegate at the convention.”

In 2004, UAW President Ron Gettlefingher appointed Curry to his first

position on the staff of the UAW International, assigning him to be a “Servicing Representative” under Gary Casteel, the director of Tennessee-based Region 8, which covered 40,000 UAW members in 12 southeastern and mid-Atlantic states.

As an International Servicing Rep from 2005 to 2009 Curry took in an annual salary of up to \$140,941, the equivalent of \$192,970 in current dollars, according to the UAW’s LM-2 filing with the US Department of Labor. In June 2010, he was named Region 8 Assistant Director by Casteel, and his annual salary was bumped up to \$158,693 between 2010 and 2013. After serving as Casteel’s close aide for nearly a decade, Curry took over as director of Region 8 in 2014, with a salary of \$165,950, as Casteel moved up to UAW secretary-treasurer.

Like Gettlefingher and convicted former UAW President Gary Jones, Curry’s training was not in the school of the class struggle but at a business school, where he learned the trade of cutting labor costs and boosting corporate profit. Curry got his Bachelor of Science Degree in Business Administration-Finance from University of North Carolina-Charlotte before obtaining his MBA from the University of Alabama in 2013.

## Freightliner Five

Soon after arriving at Region 8, Curry became involved in the series of efforts in the early 2000s to unionize workers at European and Asian-owned factories in the southern states and stem the loss of dues-paying workers. However, the workers at the Mercedes Benz plant in Vance, Alabama, Nissan’s plant in Smyrna, Tennessee and several Freightliner plants in North Carolina saw no reason to join an organization that accepted plant closings, mass layoffs and wage cuts in the North. These defeats foretold later UAW debacles at Volkswagen in Chattanooga, Tennessee in 2014 and Nissan’s Canton, Mississippi plant in 2017.

A particularly telling experience was the unionization drive at the Freightliner plant in Cleveland, North Carolina. After the \$38 billion merger of Daimler AG and Chrysler in 1998, UAW President Stephen Yokich gained a position on Daimler’s corporate board of directors. The UAW leveraged this position and its alliance with the German IG Metall union—which had several seats on Daimler’s board—to get the company to sign a “neutrality” pact in 2000 designed to make it easier for the UAW to gain recognition at its Freightliner plants in North Carolina.

Instead of resisting the UAW and forcing it to expend considerable resources on another failed effort to win a secret ballot vote, Daimler invited the UAW campaigners into the factory for two weeks. Once the

UAW got 50 percent of the workers to sign cards, the union was certified at the Cleveland Freightliner plant in 2003.

Unbeknownst to the workers, however, in exchange for this card-check arrangement, the UAW agreed to a secret deal in 2002, set to stay in place for five years, which prohibited any pattern agreement with other Freightliner facilities, any cost of living, profit sharing and supplemental pay, and any restrictions on overtime. The quid pro quo was signed by Heavy Truck Department head Nate Gooden and was ruthlessly enforced by Region 8 Director Gary Casteel and his right-hand man, Ray Curry.

When negotiations began for a new contract in 2007, the newly elected Local 3250 bargaining committee, under immense pressure from the rank-and-file, opposed efforts by Daimler and the UAW to bring the company's "last and final" offer to a vote. The deal included a 3 percent raise for top-tier workers, a wage freeze for lower seniority workers, who made up half of the workforce, and cuts to retiree health care. It also did not address scores of unresolved health and safety grievances.

Unwilling to continue working without a contract, the bargaining committee voted unanimously for strike action without waiting for authorization from the International, the membership having previously voted strike authorization by a 98.4 percent margin. The walkout began April 2, 2007. Within hours, however, the UAW International intervened to shut down the strike. Casteel told the local president that it was illegal, unsanctioned, unauthorized, and anyone participating in the strike could be disciplined, up to termination.

The UAW International then negotiated a contract extension on its own and took over negotiations, bypassing the elected bargaining committee. It then accepted the concessions contract that the bargaining committee had previously rejected. When the membership voted down the contract, the UAW intervened to force a re-vote. After intense threats and browbeating, the UAW secured ratification on the second try.

All 11 members of the bargaining committee were fired with the tacit agreement of the UAW. Six were later reinstated after signing "last chance" agreements drawn up by the UAW International, in which they claimed they had been "misled" by other committee members. The five most militant members—Allen Bradley, Franklin Torrence, Robert Whiteside, Glenna Swinford, and David Crisco—were terminated with the blessing of the UAW International and the Casteel-Curry Region 8 leadership.

In comments quoted in the April 18, 2007 edition of the *Charlotte Observer*, Casteel made it clear the UAW would do nothing to defend the victimized workers, saying, "There are two things a company will take the hardest stance on—workplace violence and an unauthorized work stoppage. They are not going to reinstate them."

Following the strike, the UAW brought the five workers up on internal charges for "behavior unbecoming of a union member" for leading a strike unauthorized by the UAW International. Although they were acquitted in a trial held by the local, the workers who became known as the Freightliner Five were drummed out of the UAW and barred from attending union meetings.

"The bottom line is that the rank and file is taken out of the equation in the negotiations," Robert Whiteside, one of the Freightliner Five, told the WWS in 2008. "I do believe there was a discussion between the company and the International before we started."

### Curry's rise to the top

Curry's star rose after the UAW had already spent decades colluding with the auto and truck bosses to destroy the jobs, living standards and working conditions of its members. Between 2001 and 2014, the number

of UAW members fell by nearly half, from 701,818 to 403,000. Since reaching a peak of 1.5 million members in 1979, the UAW had lost 1.1 million, or 77 percent of its membership by 2014, the year Curry became Region 8 director.

In 2007, UAW President Ron Gettelfinger signed the "transformational contracts" with GM, Ford and Chrysler, which established the two-tier wage scheme and abolished the long-standing principle of "equal pay for equal work." During the 2009 bankruptcy restructuring of GM and Chrysler, the UAW collaborated with the Obama administration to wipe out tens of thousands of jobs, gut whatever remained of income protections for laid off workers and halve the wages of all new hires. The historic concessions set the pattern for the givebacks that UAW Heavy Truck Directors General Holiefield, Gary Casteel and Ray Curry would hand over to Volvo in every contract since 2008.

While auto and truck workers suffered massive job and income losses over the last two decades, the assets and investment income of the UAW increased as the corporations funneled a portion of the money the UAW helped them rob from workers back into the union coffers. Literally billions of dollars were handed to the UAW through labor-management training centers, corporate shares, board positions and the formation of the UAW Retirees Medical Benefits Trust.

In June 2018, Curry was selected as secretary-treasurer at the UAW 37th annual Constitutional Convention after his boss Gary Casteel quietly withdrew his bid for reelection. Casteel, who had been on the shortlist to replace outgoing UAW President Dennis Williams, instead decided to work with the FBI before he was indicted in the widespread corruption case, which would lead to the conviction of Williams, Gary Jones and other top UAW executives. It strains credibility to believe that Curry, described as Casteel's protégé by the *Detroit Free Press*, was not aware of the bribing of his fellow UAW officials and their embezzlement of millions of dollars in union dues.

In any case, as secretary-treasurer Curry hopped on the gravy train with his \$236,608 salary, plus additional salaries and traveling expenses for his newly-appointed positions as a trustee of the UAW Retirees Medical Benefits Trust and member of Daimler's supervisory board. In 2019, he approved the spending of \$2.3 million in legal fees to defend top UAW officials caught in the corruption probe.

In 2018, as head of the Heavy Truck Department, Curry signed a six-year deal covering 6,000 Daimler Trucks North America (DTNA) workers in North Carolina and other states, which maintained the two-tier wage system and included an average annual pay increase of less than 2 percent. After the UAW rammed through the deals a company spokesman boasted, "The agreements represent the continuation of a long and fruitful relationship between the UAW and DTNA, and we are proud to renew our partnership with them for another six years."

In 2019, Curry oversaw the sellout of the strike by 3,500 Mack-Volvo Trucks workers in Pennsylvania, Maryland and other states, forcing them back to work before seeing, let alone voting on, another concessionary contract. Although the strike led to layoffs at the New River Valley plant, Curry ordered NRV workers to remain on the job, isolating the Mack-Volvo workers just like the UAW is doing to the NRV workers now.

In April 2020, Curry was appointed to the Washington D.C.-based Democracy Initiative, a Democratic Party think tank and lobbying group that includes his fellow union bureaucrats who head the AFL-CIO labor federation, the American Federations of Teachers and other unions.

The description of the organization says: "United by a shared vision for a political process that counts every voice and every vote equally, we are mobilizing members of Democracy Initiative organizations to ensure that all Americans can vote, diminish the influence of corporate and special interests ... Together, we can break down these barriers and protect our democracy from the systematic effort to shift power from the many to a wealthy few by silencing our voices in the workplace, in the ballot box,

and in the offices of our elected officials.”

As his record shows—from the victimization of the Freightliner Five to running roughshod over the democratic rights of Daimler, Mack-Volvo and Volvo workers in 2018, 2019 and 2021—Curry has spent his entire career “silencing voices in the workplace” and imposing the dictates of the corporations and the wealthy few on the working class.

Curry is now seeking to isolate the Volvo strikers, conceal any information about the strike from autoworkers, and starve the NRV workers into submission with \$275 a week in strike pay, while he brings home a weekly salary of \$4,538.

There is nothing particularly remarkable about Curry. Along with the other top executives who staff the UAW and the AFL-CIO, he personifies the social interests of a privileged layer that benefits from the exploitation of the workers it claims to represent.



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