UAW President Rory Gamble to step down, setting stage for elevation of Secretary-Treasurer Ray Curry

Marcus Day
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On Friday, United Auto Workers President Rory Gamble announced that he would step down from his position at the end of the month. Gamble had previously indicated in comments to the press in April that he was considering retiring early, before the end of the term that would otherwise have gone until June 2022.

Gamble's move sets the stage for the likely elevation, barring a significant upset, of current Secretary-Treasurer Ray Curry to the UAW's top spot. He would become the union's fourth president in a little over three years, a period during which a far-reaching corruption scandal and growing anger and unrest among rank-and-file workers have plunged the UAW into an intense crisis.

Secretary-Treasurer Curry is currently heading up the UAW's efforts to isolate and sabotage the second strike this year by nearly 3,000 Volvo Trucks workers in Virginia. As director of the union's Heavy Trucks Department, Curry led "negotiations" that resulted in two virtually identical concessionary contracts with the Sweden-based multinational truck manufacturer. Both agreements would have raised health care costs, kept top pay increases below inflation, and maintained the multitier wage and benefit system, if it were not for the rebellion of Volvo workers against the UAW's efforts to push through the company's terms.

Curry oversaw the decision to unilaterally shut down the Volvo workers' first strike at the end of April, when the UAW sent workers back to work without holding a vote on the deal or even revealing its contents. Workers rejected the agreement by an overwhelming 91 percent, with the recently formed Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee (VWRFC) leading the opposition to the sellout contract. Curry, along with regional and Local 2069 officials, returned within weeks with a second agreement that had only cosmetic changes from the first, and which workers again voted down by a 90 percent margin.

The UAW subsequently allowed a second walkout to begin on June 7, feeling it had no choice given the widespread opposition of workers to the company's demands. However, Curry and the union have since been doing everything in their power to isolate the strike and starve workers into submission.

To date, the UAW has published nothing on its main website or Facebook page about the strike, deliberately trying to keep its hundreds of thousands of members in the dark about the Volvo workers' struggle. This silence is being carried out in tandem with a blackout on the strike in the national media, reflecting concerns more broadly in establishment circles over the potential that the workers' rebellion could spread.

Talks between the UAW and the company on a third deal officially restarted last Wednesday, but workers have told the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* that they have been told nothing by the union about the content of its supposed negotiations.

The UAW is doling out only $275 a week in strike pay from its nearly $800 million strike fund. At the same time, it is giving the company a free hand to take aggressive action against strikers, doing nothing to oppose the company's cutoff of health coverage and other insurance and its efforts to keep production running with scab labor.

"We got our insurance termination letters today," a striking worker told the WSWS. "Supposedly it's going cost thousands a month to cover me and my dependents. They also cancelled all my life insurance. It says employment termination as the reason. Bastards!"

Other workers have repeatedly voiced their frustration on Facebook over the paltry character of the union's temporary medical coverage, with many reporting problems when they go to fill prescriptions.

Curry's treacherous role at Volvo is in line with his entire record while rising through the ranks of the UAW apparatus. He has been attempting this year, thus far unsuccessfully, to reprise his sellout of the 2019 strike at Mack Trucks, which

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is also owned by the Volvo Group.

Both Gamble's statement and media reports cite the UAW's desire for a president who can serve multiple four-year terms and ensure greater stability. Under the terms of its agreement with federal prosecutors, the UAW will hold a referendum before next summer's convention on whether to amend the union's constitution to allow direct elections of UAW leaders. Curry's appointment as Gamble's successor would ensure that there would be an incumbent prior to any elections, one who is trusted both by the corporations and the UAW's long-dominant faction.

Gamble's two predecessors, Dennis Williams and Gary Jones, were each recently sentenced to multiple years in federal prison, having pleaded guilty for their parts in a conspiracy to embezzle over a million dollars in union funds. Gamble himself replaced Jones on an "acting" basis in late 2019 after the latter had stepped down, facing an imminent indictment.

In his statement announcing his retirement, Gamble ludicrously attempted to present himself as leading a successful reform of the UAW during his two years as president: "I said on Day One I would hand over the keys to this treasured institution as a clean union... after looking at the progress we have made and the best interests of UAW members for a stable transfer of power, this is the right time for me to turn over the reins."

The "treasured institution" Gamble is leaving, however, is in the most fundamental respects unchanged. From the beginning, the federal investigation into UAW corruption, initiated under the Obama administration and continued under Trump, was aimed not at transforming it into an organization which genuinely represents workers, but rather at preventing the total collapse of the UAW's authority.

While the most blatant swindlers in the UAW leadership have been ceremoniously ousted and given slap-on-the-wrist fines and sentences at white-collar prisons, the "union" has in fact deepened its incestuous relations with the companies.

The UAW continues to serve as a well-compensated representative of management, tasked with disciplining workers and suppressing opposition, as evidenced by its sellout of the 2019 General Motors and Mack Trucks strikes, the concessions contracts imposed at all the Big Three auto companies that year, the sellout of strikes by grad student workers at Columbia University and New York University earlier this year, the current attempts to sabotage the struggle by Volvo Trucks workers, and, most significantly, the union's role in ensuring production and profitmaking continued throughout the coronavirus pandemic, at the expense of workers' health and lives.

Obscenely, Gamble concludes his statement by writing that he hopes he will be remembered for "facing a once-in-a-lifetime pandemic head on and saving lives." In fact, Gamble, along with the UAW leadership as a whole, is responsible for at the very least dozens of autoworkers' deaths from COVID-19. After workers, defying the opposition of the UAW, forced the shutdown of the auto industry in a wave of wildcat strikes in March 2020, the UAW colluded with the companies to reopen factories just two months later, while the pandemic was still raging in its early stages.

The UAW has never made public the number of its members who were infected with or died from the virus.

A more accurate portrayal of Gamble's role and his relationship to the auto companies was provided by Ford's executive chairman, Bill Ford, who issued a statement declaring that "Rory has been a good friend over the years, and he is someone I have always trusted."

Gamble has been rewarded handsomely for shepherding the UAW through the final stages of negotiations with federal prosecutors, receiving over $460,000 in compensation between 2019 and 2020. Seventeen UAW officers receive payouts of over $200,000, according to last year's tax filings, while hundreds more receive over $100,000 annually. The UAW has spent close to $3 million in legal fees just to one law firm overseeing its defense in the federal investigation, along with tens of thousands of dollars for individual officers' legal expenses. Curry himself has had over $10,000 in legal fees paid for by the UAW since 2019, the purpose of which the union has not explained.

No amount of pressure on such an institution, which exists as a corporate cheap labor contractor run by upper-middle-class executives, will result in its reform. The path forward for workers necessitates the construction of genuine workers' organizations from below, including the expansion of the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee and spread of rank-and-file solidarity committees throughout Volvo's operations and the auto industry in the US and globally.

Volvo workers are increasingly recognizing their power and potential support among the international working class. "I've seen statements made that the world is watching what happens with this strike," a striking worker told the WSWS Friday. "If we get any gains in a contract it may be the beginning of a big movement all over the world. It makes me feel very proud to think I may be a very small part of this movement."

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