

# Sri Lankan workers speak out in support of Volvo strikers

**Our correspondents**  
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Workers in Sri Lanka continue to voice their solidarity with the 3,000 striking Volvo workers in the US. The New River Valley Volvo plant workers in Dublin, Virginia have been on strike for a month, after overwhelmingly rejecting two concessionary contracts pushed by the United Auto Workers (UAW).

The statements published below—from workers, artists, students, the Safety Committee of Teachers, Students and Parents (SCTSP) and the Action Committee for the Defence of Freedom of Art and Expression (ACDAE)—are another important expression of the growing global support for the Volvo workers. The SCTSP and ACDAE were established with the political assistance of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka.

The SCTSP is fighting for independent action by teachers, students and parents against premature school reopenings, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, and explaining the necessity for a socialist perspective among educators.

As part of a broad fight for the democratic rights of the working class and oppressed masses, the ACDAE has launched a campaign for the release of jailed poet Ahnaf Jazeem, who was falsely accused of promoting Muslim extremist ideologies. He was arrested a year ago, under Sri Lanka's draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act.

## **Safety Committee of Teachers, Students and Parents**

The Volvo truck workers' struggle marks a turning point in the class struggle in the US and internationally, because the workers have decided to fight Volvo's attempts to severely curtail the fundamental rights of workers, and the treacherous actions of the UAW, which is working hand in hand with the company in this attack.

Today, workers around the world are involved in production for companies such as Volvo, Ford and General Motors. Volvo workers are demonstrating the power they have as a class, by stopping production at this large corporation. While the working class faces severe exploitation internationally, the wealth of a handful of corporations and bank owners is growing exponentially. The time has come to put an end to this system.

For more than three weeks, Volvo workers have maintained their courageous strike. The only way to provide workers with the strength to win their demands is to mobilise the support of the working class in the US and internationally, and to fight for a socialist program. At the SCTSP, we have held a broad discussion among teachers, students and parents on the international significance of the Volvo workers' struggle.

Education in Sri Lanka has been disrupted for a year and a half by the COVID-19 pandemic. Without facilitating online education, the Gotabhaya Rajapakse government wants to open schools in unsafe conditions, as part of its murderous "new normal" policy. Education sector unions are not opposing the unsafe re-openings and are pushing teachers and students to follow the government's deadly steps.

Although the media has censored the struggle of Volvo workers around the world, the analysis and reports of their struggles on the *World Socialist Web Site* have attracted the attention of significant sections of workers internationally. This is a crucial development in building an international alliance of workers.

## **Action Committee for the Defence of Freedom of Art and Expression**

We, the Action Committee for the Defense of Freedom of Art and Expression (ACDAE), stand in solidarity with Volvo workers in Dublin, Virginia. Both the company and the UAW have shown themselves to be representing the same ruling class interests against the workers, who have repeatedly rejected the pro-company contracts backed by the union.

In sharp contrast to the UAW's treacherous role, the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee (VWRFC) is providing a shining example to workers all over the world on how to carry out such a fight. We support its call for workers to vote against the sellout. A democratic process must be initiated so that workers have full access to the contract and all related documents, can hold meetings prior to voting, and arrive at informed conclusions regarding their future.

The assault on workers' rights and wages goes hand in hand with the imperialist war drive and the global attack on democratic rights. The show trial against WikiLeaks editor and publisher Julian Assange is at the forefront of this assault. The Sri Lankan government has intensified its assaults on artists, journalists, environmentalists and social media activists. Poet Ahnaf Jazeem has been languishing in prison for over 13 months under bogus charges of promoting "extremism" as part of this attack.

Throughout the ACDAE's fight, including its struggle for the release of Ahnaf Jazeem, we have emphasised that the assault on democratic rights and freedom of expression can be overturned only by the working class in its international fight for socialism. Creative freedoms and democratic rights are inherently incompatible with capitalism. Therefore, the task objectively rests on the shoulders of the only consistent social force against

capitalism.

Volvo workers have shown the strength of this force. What comes next depends on the working class across the US and the rest of the world. The UAW's reactionary role is mirrored by their counterparts in all countries, including Sri Lanka and India. Workers must follow the lead of the VWRFC and establish their own organisations and join with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees called by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI).

#### **Lohan Gunaweera, visual and performance artist**

I stand in solidarity with the Volvo truck workers in Dublin, Virginia. Their overwhelming rejection of the pro-company contract, presented by the UAW, is an inspiration to everyone fighting against capitalism. While companies continue to pile up profits, the workers are offered the leftover bones and scraps. The way forward for this struggle, however, is inseparably bound up with the actions of the working class across the US and the rest of the world.

In this context, the ICFI's call for the formation of an International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees is of paramount importance. Volvo workers have taken the first step in a chain of actions that will lead to profound changes in the workers' movement. The second and third steps should be taken by workers across the globe by learning from the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee: form their own independent organisations decisively separate from the trade unions, unify them in the form of an international alliance proposed by the ICFI, and take up the fight for international socialism!

#### **A worker from the General Hospital, Kalutara, Western Province**

Although the struggle of the Volvo workers is "minor news" to the capitalist media, it is a great catalyst for the working class around the world. It guides workers to focus on their strength. A group of workers in the world's most powerful country has begun to show their strength. We must support them in their struggle.

#### **Jayasekera, an agriculture instructor from Rajagiriya, Colombo**

I totally condemn the betrayal of the UAW union leaders. In this pandemic, it has increasingly become difficult for workers to survive. They need pay rises to face the rising cost of living and increased health needs. The trade union-company alliance is against that. They only want to maximise profits and so they neglect the lives of workers and their interests. The fight against this reaction must be advanced by expanding the Volvo Workers' Rank-and-File Committee and strengthening its collaboration with other workers internationally.

#### **A nurse from Sirima Bandaranaike hospital in Peradeniya, Kandy**

As workers, we must not let this strike of Volvo workers be isolated. We should feel it like our own struggle. Workers everywhere, across all national borders, should defend their struggle against the treachery of the company and the trade unions.

I see similarities with the treachery of the health sector trade unions in Sri Lanka. Our unions here also pretend that they are working for us, but what they are doing is forcing the government's agenda on us. I agree that workers should organise

independently from capitalist interests and reject the trade unions.

#### **A technology student from the University of Colombo**

I wondered whether the workers could take power against big companies and governments, but looking at the growth of the Volvo workers' struggle, I realised what would happen if there was a workers' unification internationally and the workers took the struggle into their own hands.

The entire production of this world is in the hands of the workers. If Volvo employees around the world were involved in supporting New River Valley workers, it would have a huge impact on the company. If the workers of the world unite, it will be the death knell of the capitalist system.

#### **Vinod, a transport worker**

I express my fraternal support for the Volvo workers' strike, because I believe it is the harbinger of a revolutionary counter-offensive against the brutal and indecent exploitation of workers by the capitalist class.

I recently began reading the *World Socialist Web Site* and was surprised to learn from it how the major capitalist companies in Sri Lanka have piled up massive wealth during the pandemic. Hayleys Company, for example, has earned the largest ever profit in its 143-year history, i.e., a net profit of 14 billion rupees.

But what have the owners of those companies said to us? They said that we must be happy that we are receiving salaries, under conditions where the country's economy is being disrupted by the pandemic. We were not granted any additional allowance because of the pandemic, and had to purchase face masks and sanitisers from our own salaries. Family members were also hit by the pandemic, mainly through infected workers.

When we complained about these issues to the union leaders, they advised us to "think practically," because management could not grant all our demands during such difficult economic conditions. The unions in Sri Lanka have prevented us from struggling to win our demands, advising us not to demand a "pound of flesh." Like their counterparts at Volvo, they are fighting against workers and defending the companies' profits.

The struggle waged by Volvo workers is our struggle. I urge all workers to come forward and support the striking Volvo workers.



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