

“What I’ve realized is that the union officials are paid to keep us in line”

On eve of contract vote, veteran Volvo Trucks worker warns about UAW ballot-stuffing, calls for united fight against sellout deal

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The opposition among striking Volvo Trucks workers in Virginia is continuing to grow against the tentative agreement the United Auto Workers union is seeking to push through in a rushed ratification vote on Friday. Nearly 3,000 workers have been on strike for a month to fight for substantial wage and benefit improvements and to overturn more than a decade of givebacks handed to the multinational company by the UAW.

The UAW has refused workers’ demands for the release of the full contract and all the side letters of agreement signed by the UAW and Volvo that will dictate their wages and conditions over the next six years. They have also ignored workers’ demands for the postponement of the vote until workers have sufficient time to study the deal. Local, regional and International UAW officials are frightened of the hostility of workers, who have already rejected two UAW-backed agreements, that they have not even called any mass membership meetings to discuss the contract before the vote.

Opposition at the New River Valley plant has been led by the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee (VWRFC), which issued a series of statements this week calling on workers to reject the latest deal and demanding that the UAW release the full contract, hold mass meetings to answer workers’ questions and give workers 10 days to study and discuss the deal before any vote. The VWRFC has also called for “rank-and-file supervision of the counting of ballots, to ensure that all votes are counted fairly.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with a veteran Volvo Trucks worker with nearly three decades at the

plant about the upcoming contract vote, the role of the UAW and the need to build and expand the network of rank-and-file committees to provide a genuine voice and leadership to the struggle of workers. To protect the worker from company and union retribution, he will be referred to as “Jimmy.”

“I am confident that we will vote this contract down again, but it might be by a narrower margin this time,” Jimmy said, citing the economic pressure on workers due to the poverty-level strike benefits from the UAW. “Some guys want to get back to work, but the majority will vote against this,” he said.

“The closer the margin,” he warned, “the more brazen the UAW will be to throw some ‘no’ votes into the ‘yes’ column. They don’t start counting the votes until the parking lot is empty and then there is no one left in the building but local and UAW International reps. A lot of workers take pictures of their ‘no’ votes, but the ballots are generic pieces of paper, which don’t have our names on them. I don’t trust the union and I don’t know of anyone who does. There’s no reason we can’t have the ballots counted publicly for the sake of integrity.”

What information has been revealed about the contract shows it is little more than a rehash of the two previous ones rejected by workers. Despite claims that the two-tier wage and benefit system had been ended, new hires will have to labor six years before reaching top pay. In an industry with chronic downturns and layoffs, a worker stuck on this six-year “in-progression” treadmill could, in fact, be forced to work a decade or more before reaching top pay—if ever.

Increases for higher-paid workers that average 2 percent a year would be more than eaten up by the rising cost of living and sharp increases in out-of-pocket healthcare contributions. This includes a first-ever insurance premium charge for higher seniority “Core Group” workers.

“I’ve been working here for almost 30 years, and I’ve never paid for healthcare insurance. Now it’s going to be \$100 a month, plus the \$70 we pay in dues to the UAW. The new hires have been paying premiums for years, so some of them are saying, ‘Why can’t you pay? I’m already paying.’ This is a dividing tactic to split the young and the old. None of us should be paying the premium,” Jimmy said, “The company should.”

Jimmy decried the one-sidedness of the previous UAW-backed contracts, which seemed to be binding only on them, but not on the company. Other NRV workers have reported to the WSWs that UAW officials readily let Volvo modify contract terms whenever it suits them. This includes letting Volvo hire nonunion temporary workers and allowing Volvo to steal overtime pay, supplemental unemployment benefits and vacation time.

“During this last contract, Volvo eliminated 30 paint booth cleaner jobs at NRV and replaced them with outside contractors making poverty wages. That was a breach of contract. Some of us were ready to go on strike to defend those 30 workers. They needed us to defend them, and there was no way Volvo could fire all 3,000 of us. But all the UAW said was ‘file a grievance.’

“A grievance means nothing. It’s humiliating. You fight and you think you have something and then it’s not there. Halfway through the 2015 contract, they yanked the healthcare insurance for retirees who were promised medical benefits. They said the VEBA (Voluntary Employees Beneficiary Association, a UAW-run fund for retiree medical benefits) had run out of money.

“If you retire after 30 years, you get around \$1,500 a month in a pension. You can get by on that if your house and car is paid off. But if you have to pay \$800 to keep up your insurance, there is no way a man can live off \$700 a month. Everyone who retired under the last contract lost their insurance. The union said this got ‘overlooked’ in the last contract negotiations.

“This is what Volvo and the UAW think of a contract. They change it willy-nilly. If I had a dollar for every secret ‘letter of understanding’ they signed, I’d be able to retire by now. Why should we have to follow the contract if we don’t like something in it? But if we didn’t, Volvo wouldn’t file a grievance; they’d fire us.”

Referring to the UAW, Jimmy said, “What I’ve realized is that the union officials are paid to keep us in line. The local really is not a union at all. Our dues all go to the International. Volvo pays our committee members and basically says, ‘here’s your trailer [on the NRV grounds] to go play video games in.’ The local looks for any reason not to fight for us on any issue.

“I’ve been through a few contracts at NRV. I have heard the UAW say every time, ‘we’ll get ‘em next time’ and that ‘next time’ has yet to come. It really is a two-front war, like you say, against the company and the union.”

Unlike the countless strikes the UAW and other unions have isolated and betrayed, the formation of the Volvo Rank-and-File Committee has given workers a voice and a leadership to oppose the sabotage of their struggle. With the assistance of the WSWs, Volvo workers have established lines of communication with Mack-Volvo workers in Pennsylvania and Maryland, autoworkers in Detroit, Chicago and other cities, and Volvo workers in Australia, Canada and Belgium.

“If it wasn’t for the WSWs there would be no other information about our strike,” Jimmy said. The UAW “spends more time fighting you guys (WSWS) than they do fighting Volvo. They say the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee wants to divide us. Obviously, the committee is for the workers and against the company. To me it sounds silly when they oppose the rank and file. That’s us! Outside of the VWRFC and the *World Socialist Web Site*, there has been no effort to inform workers and unify us, to let others know about our struggle. Meanwhile Local 2069’s Facebook page is heavily censored. They tend to delete critical comments and boost the posts of their yes men.

“I’ve never been on a strike before where you can’t even turn to the union for information. The main reason we have gotten this far is because of the rank-and-file committee and the articles from the WSWs. We’ve gotten together with the Mack workers and Volvo workers around the world. Anything we win is because of that. Whatever happens on Friday, we are only beginning this fight.”



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