“We should have another 90 percent ‘no’ vote to show them we’re not scared”

Striking Virginia workers defiant as Volvo issues threats, Volvo Cars workers walk out in Belgium

Jerry White
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Volvo Trucks management issued a series of provocative threats against striking workers in Virginia Thursday in a last-ditch effort to bully them into accepting a six-year labor agreement worked out with the United Auto Workers (UAW). Nearly 3,000 workers, who have been on strike at the New River Valley plant in Dublin, Virginia for more than a month, are voting on a third UAW-backed proposal today.

In an indication of the growing mood of opposition among workers internationally, workers at a Volvo Cars plant in Ghent, Belgium shut down production in a wildcat action on Thursday, protesting the company’s plans to increase the workweek with the agreement of the unions. Volvo Cars is now owned separately from Volvo Trucks, but plants for the two companies remain near each other in Ghent.

Volvo is aware of the enormous opposition among workers in Virginia to the latest agreement, which is little more than a rehash of the first two agreements workers rejected by 90 percent in May and June. The UAW is seeking to beat back the resistance of workers to the latest proposal, which retains the two-tier wage and benefit system, sharply increases out-of-pocket healthcare costs for current and retired workers, and limits raises for “core” workers to an average of two percent a year, far below the rate of inflation.

The top question in the Q & A section of Volvo’s New River Valley Plant “Negotiations Update” web page on July 8 asks, “What happens if the third tentative agreement is rejected?”

In response it says, “[I]t’s important to note that we have communicated to UAW leadership that we would go back to the second tentative agreement—not the third—as a base for any additional wage discussions.”

It continues further, “[I]t’s unlikely that we would be able to reach a fourth tentative agreement before vacation shutdown, so employees would not be paid eligible vacation that was scheduled to be used during the vacation shutdown had there not been a work stoppage.”

The company concludes by stating that a continued strike would place its $400 million expansion of the New River Valley plant in jeopardy, in a clear threat to workers’ jobs. “Finally, because of the uncertainty created by not having a contract, we have already canceled the investment that would have moved cab trim into Plant 2.” It adds, “The impact on the rest of the projects is unclear at this time, and the risk of future investment being rejected would grow as the operational uncertainty dragged on.”

The Swedish-based multinational, which made more than $1 billion in profits in the first quarter of 2021 and handed over a record amount of dividend payments to its wealthy investors, is trying to put a gun to workers’ heads, in effect declaring, “Accept further concessions, or we will rob you of your meager raises, strip you of your vacation pay and maybe take your job.”

UAW President Ray Curry and UAW Local 2069 have not issued a word about the company’s blackmail attempt. That is because they are co-conspirators in the campaign to ram the contract down the throats of workers. UAW officials have refused to release the full contract for workers to read and study and are rushing through a vote, just a week after announcing the tentative agreement.

Rank-and-file workers remain defiant and determined to defeat the contract. “It’s obvious they’re trying to bully us,” one striking worker responded. “They’re going back to the ‘We’re going to move to Mexico’ scare tactic again. This just might piss enough people off that we get a landslide rejection. We should respond with another 90 percent ‘no’

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vote to show them we mean business and are not scared by their threats."

The worker added: "The union claims the full contract is in the backroom of the union hall. But I've seen several messages on Facebook of workers who have gone to the hall to look at it, and the local union officials say it's not there or they have to wait until another official shows up before they can see it. Workers are fed up with the UAW."

Referring to the company's threats, another worker said: "They are trying to scare us into voting for this. If we vote this down, they are going to say, 'We've halted all construction and we're going to look elsewhere for our new plant.' I guarantee that's what they'll say if we vote it down.

"A lot of younger workers stand to lose a lot of money if they go back to the second TA, heck I'll lose $2-3 an hour. But we have to get the word out not to be intimidated by these threats to vote this down."

The opposition to both the company and the UAW has been led by the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee. In the run-up to today's vote, the VWRFC has issued a statement demanding the release of the full contract and all side letters, with sufficient time for workers to study and discuss it before any vote. The committee has called on workers to reject the sellout agreement and expand the strike to the company's Mack-Volvo plants and more broadly throughout the auto industry.

The action by Belgian workers shows that united action is possible. In recent days, Volvo workers have established connections with and received the support of workers at the Mack-Volvo plants in Pennsylvania and Maryland; the major auto plants in Detroit, Chicago and other cities; and Volvo's international operations, including in Australia, Canada and Belgium.

Earlier this week, campaigners from the WSWS and Socialist Equality Parties in Europe encountered widespread support for the striking workers from Belgian workers at the company's giant complex in Ghent, two days before the walkout at Volvo Cars.

"The Belgian workers have every right to stand up and we support them," one member of the VWRFC told the WSWS in response to the walkout at Volvo Cars. "If the Belgian workers lose their shorter workweek, the company will start with 40 hours, then it will be 50-60 hours like we're working."

"We all face the same issues," he added. "Just like the Belgian workers, Volvo said we were essential workers and forced us back into the plant after the pandemic started. They said, 'We appreciate that you have come to work, please take care.' I told them, 'Maybe next year when our contract comes up, y'all will take care of us.' I like what the Belgian worker said: 'We all made one big team during the pandemic, so it's a good idea that we make a big team for Volvo employees everywhere'."

"Our fight is their fight," another VWRFC worker said of the Belgian workers. "Everybody is fighting the same thing. I watched the video of the Detroit workers, and they have the exact same problem we do. It's funny, you think all these years that we were the only ones facing this problem, but it turns out the whole world is. It is all starting to get exposed, and the skeletons are coming out of the closet."

A veteran Volvo worker said: "If it hadn't been for you guys [the WSWS], how would they know? Volvo wouldn't tell them about New River Valley, nor would they tell us about Ghent. Now you gave us that chance to communicate. I know at least the American media are not trying to share this sort of thing, and I doubt the European media are much different."

He added: "I sent this video to many other NRV workers, and they texted me back with thumbs ups and other signs of appreciation. Many of them are in a state of disbelief that the workers in Ghent are supporting us. The timing of the video could not have been better. Right as Volvo is trying to scare us with their public relations machine, right before the vote in just a few hours, we see this video and it reignites the fire."

Volvo workers should respond to the threats by the company by expanding their struggle—to the Mack-Volvo workers and other autoworkers in the US and Volvo Trucks and Volvo Cars workers throughout the world.

The strike at Volvo Trucks should also be connected to the struggles of workers in other industries, including the ATI steel workers in Pennsylvania and other states, where the United Steelworkers is attempting to force through a concessions contract; striking miners at Warrior Met in Alabama and Vale in Canada; and Frito-Lay workers in Topeka, Kansas, who are on strike after rejecting a contract backed by the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers.

The expansion and unification of the struggles of every section of the working class requires the formation of a network of rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, which are working in every country to enforce the demands of the ruling class.

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