

Class war at Volvo and the fight for rank-and-file committees

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On Sunday, the United Auto Workers announced that it has ordered a revote on the tentative agreement that striking Volvo Trucks workers in Dublin, Virginia, voted against by 60 percent.

The UAW's extraordinary action came after a statement from the company that it has declared an "impasse" in the contract negotiations and is moving to unilaterally impose the agreement rejected by the workers.

Volvo is declaring war on the workers, and the UAW is providing them cover for their strikebreaking operation. UAW Local 2069 President Matt Blondino issued a statement acknowledging that the company was attempting to break the strike, but he made clear that the UAW would take no action other than possibly filing an "unfair labor charges" suit that, according to the union, "could take months or years to resolve."

That is, the UAW is telling workers that whatever the outcome of the "revote" on Wednesday, they will be forced back to work based on the agreement that they have rejected.

There is in fact no "impasse" between the company and the union, but rather an impasse between Volvo and the UAW, on one side, and the workers on the other. Throughout the struggle at Volvo, the UAW has systematically isolated the striking workers to impose the demands of management. It denied workers the right to even see the full agreements they voted on, enforced an effective blackout of the struggle by refusing to inform its membership that the strike was even happening, and starved workers on strike pay of \$275 a week.

The defiant "no" vote by Volvo workers Friday comes after the rejection of two previous tentative agreements by 90 percent. It is part of a growing upsurge of working-class rebellion and militancy that is pitting workers in direct conflict with the organizations that claim to represent them.

- Nearly 600 workers at snack giant Frito-Lay's

Topeka, Kansas, plant are on strike after rejecting a fourth contract supported by the Bakery, Confectionary, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers (BCTGM) union. The BCTGM is isolating the struggle and is starving workers on the picket lines with \$105 a week in strike pay.

- In Terre Haute, Indiana, the Workers United union, which is affiliated with the SEIU, announced on July 3 that it was unilaterally imposing a concessions contract that 460 Amcor packaging workers had voted down.

- Some 1,300 workers at Allegheny Technologies (ATI) in Pennsylvania and four other states have been on strike for more than three months in a struggle that has been isolated by the United Steelworkers (USW). Last week, the USW announced that it had reached an agreement that will cut hundreds of jobs and includes wage increases below the rate of inflation. Workers are voting on the agreement Tuesday.

- In Alabama, 1,100 coal miners have been on strike for more than 100 days after rejecting a sellout contract backed by the United Mine Workers of America, which has left miners isolated on the picket lines and which resorted to physical violence to intimidate opposition.

This process is unfolding on an international scale. In Belgium, workers at Volvo Cars (owned separately from Volvo Trucks) launched wildcat action to shut down production beginning on Thursday against a company-union agreement to extend the workweek. In Canada, 2,450 Vale Miners in Sudbury, Ontario, have been on strike for six weeks after rejecting a union-backed concessions contract. Thousands of electricity workers in Turkey have initiated a series of wildcat strikes to protest sellout contracts agreed to by the Tes-?? union.

The development of the class struggle completely refutes the efforts of pseudo-left groups to portray the unions as the only legitimate form of working class organization.

The defenders of the bureaucratic apparatus (including pseudo-left organizations like the Democratic Socialists of America and its affiliated *Jacobin* magazine) refer to the Socialist Equality Party as “sectarian,” with Exhibit One being our call for the formation of rank-and-file committees. By “sectarianism,” they do not mean a supposed failure to carry out work among workers in the unions. There is in fact no organization outside of the SEP that assists workers in the unions to develop their independent initiative.

Rather, the opponents of rank-and-file organizations are horrified by the growth of an insurrectionary movement against the bureaucracy. They are aligned with powerful sections of the ruling class, including the Biden administration, that correctly see in the trade unions essential instruments for suppressing the class struggle. Representing privileged sections of the upper middle class, their aim is to perpetuate a “labor movement” that is integrated into the state and corporate management. How else can one explain the fact that they have written nothing about the strike at Volvo, which is undoubtedly one of the most significant working class struggles in decades?

A counteroffensive of the working class requires the formation of independent organizations of struggle, a network of rank-and-file committees that are controlled by and answerable to the workers.

In April, the International Committee of the Fourth International launched the initiative for the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. “The IWA-RFC,” it wrote, “will work to develop the framework for new forms of independent, democratic and militant rank-and-file organizations of workers in factories, schools and workplaces on an international scale. The working class is ready to fight. But it is shackled by reactionary bureaucratic organizations that suppress every expression of resistance.”

The past two-and-a-half months have confirmed the correctness of this initiative. In the case of the Volvo workers, their ability to resist the dictates of the company and the efforts of the UAW to impose a defeat has been bound up with the development at NRV of the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee, which has coordinated opposition. The workers have also been enormously strengthened by the statements of support from workers internationally and by the wildcat action at Volvo Cars, which erupted on the eve of the last contract vote.

The struggle at Volvo has far-reaching implications.

The decades-long suppression of the class struggle by the corporatist unions is coming to an end. The pandemic and the ruling class response to it, which has led to death on a massive scale accompanied by an unprecedented transfer of wealth to the rich, has deeply discredited the entire capitalist system and created the conditions for a revolutionary upsurge of workers throughout the world.

Many of those involved in the rank-and-file committee do not yet consider themselves socialists. They want to win their strike, which can and must be won. They are part of an increasingly militant working class that is no longer willing to accept the constant attack on their jobs and living conditions.

The responsibility of socialists is not to stand aside, but to assist workers in the development of their independent organization and initiative while seeking to develop a deeper understanding of the social and political implications of the struggles in which they are engaged.

The Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* call for the broadest possible mobilization of the working class behind the striking Volvo workers. They have taken a courageous stand in defiance of Volvo management and the UAW.

But they cannot fight this battle alone. Workers must respond to the threat to reopen the plant in Dublin, Virginia, and break the strike by shutting down Volvo operations in the US and internationally. The fight must be developed throughout the auto industry and beyond. If conditions of industrial slavery can be imposed in Dublin, they can be imposed in Detroit and Chicago, Ghent and Sudbury.

The entire working class must respond to the class war at Volvo through the building of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.



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