The Volvo strike and the silence of the pseudo-left lambs

Marcus Day
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With the strike by roughly 2,900 Volvo Trucks workers in southwestern Virginia reaching a decisive turning point this week, the silence on the walkout by organizations and political figures that present themselves as "left-wing" or "socialist" is taking on an even greater significance.

The Volvo strike is undoubtedly one of the most important labor struggles in the US in decades. Early on, workers formed the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee, which has taken the leading role in organizing opposition to the attempts by the company and the United Auto Workers to enforce concessions in health care, pay and working conditions. On Friday, workers at Volvo's New River Valley plant voted down a third UAW-backed concessionary agreement by a nearly two-to-one margin, after voting down two similar contracts earlier this year by 90 percent.

The company has responded to this courageous stand with a naked and brutal attempt to break the strike, which the UAW is aiding and abetting. On Sunday, the UAW announced that Volvo would unilaterally impose the third tentative agreement beginning Monday. Instead of opposing this dictatorial move, the UAW is going along with it, forcing workers to vote again on the same deal on Wednesday, telling them that the contract will remain in effect regardless of the outcome, while falsely presenting its calling of a revote as a legal requirement.

As the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee wrote in its statement calling for a "no" vote on Wednesday, if the company is successful in defeating the strike, "The corporate owners would take it as a sign that it's open season on the rights of the working class."

The *World Socialist Web Site* has previously examined the silence on the Volvo strike that has characterized the response of organizations such as the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and one of its leading publications, *Jacobin* magazine. The DSA and *Jacobin* have continued to keep quiet about the strike despite the recent escalation of the extraordinary attacks on workers' rights being carried out by Volvo, as have self-described "socialist" organizations such as Socialist Alternative and Left Voice.

The silence over the Volvo strike has taken on the character of a coordinated cover-up among virtually all the official institutions of the corporate, political, media, and union establishments, with the pseudo-left dutifully following their lead. From the UAW to the broader AFL-CIO apparatus, to the White House and the Democratic and Republican Parties, to the major national news outlets, to the DSA and its corollaries—all have in effect been working in tandem to say as little as possible about the Volvo strike.

This extends to the most prominent Democratic Party politicians commonly touted as its "left" or "progressive" wing, often now affiliated in one way or another with the DSA. Democratic Congressional Representatives and DSA members Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Rashida Tlaib have made no statements on the strike.

Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, who periodically refers to himself as a "democratic socialist" and was backed by the DSA in each of his runs for the Democratic presidential nomination, has said nothing about the struggle at Volvo since April 28. On that date, Sanders issued a perfunctory tweet stating he "stood with" striking workers and calling for the company to "sit down with its workers and negotiate a fair contract now." At the time, Volvo workers were on their first strike, which the UAW unilaterally shut down a few days later, without holding a vote and or even releasing its first tentative agreement with the company, which workers would subsequently overwhelmingly vote down.

The blackout on the strike has extended even down to the DSA's regional and local level. The DSA's chapter in the New River Valley region, where the plant is located, has made no statements about the strike on its social media accounts since April 25, nearly three months ago, when it publicized the fact that it brought food to the union hall.

The DSA's Lee J. Carter, a member of the Virginia House of Delegates and the group's highest office-holder in the state, has made no comments on the strike.

Michael Payne, a DSA member and city councilman in Charlottesville, Virginia, issued a tweet on June 14 that took the strike as an opportunity to promote unionization, writing, "Workers, who are unionized with @UAW, are demanding better wages, benefits, & schedules. It's past time for Virginia to repeal right-to-work so every worker can join a union." But the fact of the matter is that the UAW has been working with the company throughout the year to *block* workers' demands

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for better wages, benefits, and working conditions.

The only exception which proves the rule is a short article that appeared Sunday in Labor Notes, a publication that has advocated for the reform of the increasingly corporatist trade unions long after such a reform ceased to have any viability. The article, by Labor Notes cofounder and now-DSA member Jane Slaughter, mouths a few hollow criticisms of the difficult-to-ignore collaboration of the UAW with the company, while at the same time predictably promoting illusions that workers can "inject accountability" into the thoroughly corrupt institution that is the UAW by voting to approve direct elections of union officers in a referendum later this year.

What is more significant, however, is what the article does not say: It does not call for workers to fight the company's vicious strikebreaking and reject the UAW-Volvo deal on Wednesday. Nor does it call for an expansion of the strike and the mobilization of workers to shut down all of Volvo's operations, or for solidarity actions throughout the auto industry. And, of course, it says nothing about the role of the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee in unifying and cementing opposition to all three of the UAW's sellout deals.

All these issues are radioactive for Slaughter, Labor Notes and the DSA, because they themselves are intimately tied up with and oriented towards the very same pro-corporate trade union apparatus that is assisting the company's savage attacks. Like the UAW, they are terrified of the resistance of workers finding organized expression independent of the trade unions, such as has been found in the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee.

The rebellion of workers at Volvo against the UAW—itself part of a wider growth of working class resistance to union-backed concessionary contracts —has provoked deep disquiet among the pseudo-left organizations such as the DSA and Labor Notes and the bourgeois center of gravity around which they revolve, the Democratic Party. The Democrats and their middle-class auxiliaries view the trade unions as a critical instrument to discipline the working class and prevent its struggles from developing in a more radical, socialist direction, threatening their material interests.

For nearly 40 years, since the betrayal of the PATCO air traffic controllers strike by the AFL-CIO in the early 1980s, the unions have become ever-more deeply integrated into the structures of both corporate management and the state, facilitating a decades-long onslaught on the social gains of the working class. The union executives have developed incomes and assets that now grow in direct proportion to the exploitation of their members. This is exemplified by the UAW, which has seen its holdings swell to over a billion dollars even as hundreds of thousands of its members have lost their jobs, and those who remain make less and less.

The unions' suppression of strikes and other struggles and enforcement of low-wage conditions have been a key condition for the staggering rise of the stock market and the fortunes of a tiny minority of billionaires and financial oligarchs. At the same time, a not insignificant portion of this wealth has made its way into the portfolios of privileged sections of the upper-middle class. It is this layer that the pseudo-left and the trade unions—which have become increasingly intermingled—represent, not the working class.

There has been a reciprocal process at work: Members of the pseudo-left have made their way up the trade union hierarchy, instinctively grasping after the wealth and privileges their top positions offer, while at the same time individuals trained by the union bureaucracy have used their records as "labor organizers" as steppingstones to political careers as "left" Democrats and now DSA officials.

To take two examples: Sara Nelson, president of the Association of Flight Attendants-CWA (annual compensation, $172,979) and member of the DSA, has recently been promoted as a contender for the next president of the AFL-CIO, following current head Richard Trumka. Trumka himself, who effectively gutted miners' rights and jobs in a series of betrayed strikes in the 1980s as president of the United Mine Workers union, was part of the "progressive" coalition that came into the leadership of the AFL-CIO in the mid-1990s, led by one-time DSA member John Sweeney, president of the AFL-CIO from 1995-2009.

On the other side, current DSA National Director Maria Svart spent years trained and employed as an "organizer" for the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) before moving up to a leadership position on the DSA's national political committee.

Countless other instances of these general tendencies could be found in recent decades. And, it cannot go without saying: neither Nelson, Trumka, nor Svart has uttered a word about the Volvo strike.

The silence of these layers over the Volvo strike is a social phenomenon. Both the trade union apparatuses and the pseudo-left organizations view the class struggle as something to be highly regulated and pacified—by them, as they grow wealthy in the process. Thus, the beginning of the rebellion of workers against the corporate institutions called "unions" cannot yet be spoken of, for fear it will spread further and blow apart this set-up.

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