

“To be united with them would be great”

Belgian Volvo Cars workers support striking Volvo workers in Virginia

Our reporters
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On Wednesday, reporters for the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with workers on the afternoon and evening shifts at the Volvo Cars plant in Ghent, Belgium.

Last Thursday, hundreds of workers at the plant downed tools spontaneously in a rebellion against an agreement reached between corporate management and the union that would extend the working week by 2.5 hours to 40 hours per week.

Management was only able to stop the strike by pledging to delay the introduction of extended working hours until further discussions were held with the union following the summer holidays. But the management has made clear that the 40-hour week is “not for discussion” and will be imposed regardless.

The workers spoke to our reporters the same day as Volvo Trucks workers in Dublin, Virginia are voting on a contract agreement reached between the United Auto Workers and the company. They had already rejected the same agreement on Friday by more than 60 percent. The UAW is forcing workers to vote again, in an effort to impose the pro-company deal over workers’ opposition.

“I support the action of the Americans,” one worker said. “We need to have a voice. We need to be able to say, these are the rules.” At Ghent, “what the company wants is not normal,” he said. The company “wants us to work 40 hours,” but “not the pay of 40 hours.”

Issam, a young autoworker, declared his solidarity: “Together we are stronger. So we must not give up. We must be together for the future of the workers.”

After hearing that the United Auto Workers had presented the same pro-company contract to the workers that they had already rejected, Gill, who has more than five years at the plant, said: “It’s the same as

here, because they [the union] get paid the company. The union gets paid by the company and they are not independent [for] the people. If you hear older workers, they say that in the past the union workers also worked on the line. Now they only have a desk somewhere in the tower here.”

“In the past they asked the people if they agreed with what the company proposed,” he said. “Now they just agree without even going through the people. Three years ago we struck on the assembly line because the working hours went up and they reduced the [number of] workers. The union said to us, ‘We will listen to you and ask you if any changes appear,’ and now they just signed it again.”

When he heard that the autoworkers in the United States had created their own rank-and-file committee, Gill replied, “Yes, that’s better, because the union should represent the workers, not the bosses...”

The same issues were “all over the world,” he said, “because the bosses make profits, but the normal people stay [the same].” While many people died from the coronavirus internationally, “production just keeps on going. We had two months where we stayed at home, but then the production was just the same as before the coronavirus. Nothing really changed.”

To the striking Volvo workers in Virginia, he said: “I support them if they’re there [standing up] on their feet. Our strike also was right. They want us to work more for doing the same amount.

“We build the cars they want; we produce the profits they get.”

“I’ve been here seven years,” said Koen. “I don’t

agree with the 40 hour week. It has an impact on our life and the way we live. We are normally able to leave earlier on a Friday. We organise things around that.”

Koen explained that “the union didn’t talk to the people about the plans they were making [with the company].” They were “similar issues” to what workers in the US were facing, he said. “To be united with them would be great,” he said.

The WSWS campaign team also distributed hundreds of copies of a statement calling for the mobilization of working-class support for the strike in Virginia internationally, and for the building of an independent workers’ rank-and-file committee by Volvo workers in Ghent to organize their struggle against corporate management and their allies in the unions on the basis of an international socialist perspective.



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