Build rank-and-file committees! Support the strike of the American Volvo workers!

Ulrich Rippert
13 July 2021

The spontaneous strikes at Volvo Cars in Ghent, Belgium, were an important prelude in the struggle against the reintroduction of the 40-hour work week. When workers walked off the job last Thursday and Friday, management was surprised. It announced that it would postpone the dispute over the extension of the working week until after the summer vacations.

But postponed is not canceled! The postponement is not a retreat. Management is determined to force the extension of working hours against the will of the employees. The company stated that the introduction of the 40-hour week is "not up for discussion."

Management has noticed how strong the resistance to the extension of working hours is. It wants to use the summer break to develop a strategy together with the unions to break this resistance.

The Volvo workers in Ghent must use the summer break accordingly to work out their own strategy.

The fight against the 40-hour week and the associated intensification of exploitation is part of an international struggle. Around the world, companies are using the coronavirus pandemic to implement restructuring and attacks on jobs, wages, pensions and working conditions that they have been planning for a long period. Such is the case with Volvo.

The Volvo Car Corporation ceased to be part of the Volvo Group more than twenty years ago and is now part of the Chinese vehicle group Geely, with more than 80,000 employees in more than a dozen countries. But the workers face the same problems as their colleagues at the Volvo Truck plant, which is located in the immediate vicinity in Ghent. The truck Volvo Group is also a global corporation and has factories in 18 countries. Ten other assembly plants are operated by independent companies.

As Volvo workers in Ghent walked off the job, 3,000 Volvo Trucks workers in Dublin, Virginia, USA, voted on a new labor contract. The workforce had already twice rejected, by more than 90 percent, a regressive contract signed by the United Auto Workers (UAW) union. It provided for higher health care costs, retention of the hated multi-tiered wage and benefit system, elimination of the eight-hour day and other concessions.

The third draft contract, which workers voted on Friday, was no better. Once again, the workforce at the New River Valley plant rejected it by 60 percent, deciding to continue their strike that began more than a month ago. Management reacted angrily and aggressively. It announced it would put the contract into effect unilaterally, against the majority vote of the workers.

The UAW responded to this blackmail by ordering another vote today, July 14, on the contract that workers have already rejected. At the same time, it announced, together with management, that it would unilaterally put into effect the agreement, which had been rejected by the workers several times, in any case.

To put the Dublin, Virginia situation in a nutshell: Volvo has declared war on the workers—and the UAW is covering the corporation's strikebreaking operation.

It is necessary to coordinate the growing resistance to the corporate attacks worldwide and to organize a common, international struggle. This can only be done against the unions, which are working closely with the corporations everywhere.

In Virginia, the UAW had tried to starve the strikers from the beginning. Although it has stashed away billions of dollars and its officials draw several hundred thousand dollars in annual salary, it pays strike pay that does not even equal the minimum wage. It is isolating the Dublin strike and has not informed its own members in the US about the industrial action, nor Volvo Trucks workers in other countries.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has informed striking workers at Volvo Trucks in the US about the strike against the 40-hour week in Ghent. This has strengthened

© World Socialist Web Site

them and encouraged them to continue their own struggle. The globalization of production gives workers enormous strength and power. They must become aware of this strength and together defend the rights that previous generations fought for in bitter strikes and class struggles.

The unions are trying to prevent just that. This is true not only of the American UAW, but also of the German IG Metall, the Belgian metalworkers' unions and all other unions around the world.

The highly paid co-managers in the unions and works councils represent the interests of "their" corporations against their corporate rivals and not those of the working class, which is an international class. They divide the workers and pit one section of workers against the other.

Fighting against the extension of working hours, as well as defending jobs and wages, requires breaking with the corrupt, nationalist unions and building action committees directly controlled by workers. At Volvo Trucks in Virginia, the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee is playing the critical role in resisting the UAW sellout.

In a July 11 statement, the Rank-and-File Committee called for a renewed rejection of the collective bargaining agreement. At the same time, it is calling on autoworkers in the US and around the world to support the struggle in Virginia through solidarity actions.

The committee stresses that the fight in Dublin must not be lost under any circumstances: "If they are able to get away with doing this here in Virginia—if they're able to make an example out of us—then Volvo and the other companies will do it in Allentown, Hagerstown, Detroit, Ghent, or anywhere else. The corporate owners would take it as a sign that it's open season on the rights of the working class."

The struggle at Volvo is emerging as a symbol of growing resistance to corporations and unions. In Alabama, for example, more than a thousand miners have been on strike against the Warrior Met Coal mining company since early April. They overwhelmingly rejected a preliminary five-year contract negotiated by the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA).

In Canada, miners in Sudbury, Ontario, have been on strike for six weeks after rejecting a union-backed demotion contract. Thousands of electricity workers in Turkey have begun a series of spontaneous strikes to protest deteriorating working conditions agreed to by the Tes-Is union.

Resistance is also growing in Belgium.

In June, employees of the British pharmaceutical company GlaxoSmithKline went on strike for eleven days against the dismissal of temporary workers and social cuts. With more than 9,000 employees, GSK is the largest private employer in Wallonia.

That same month, workers at Shur-Lok International, a company specializing in metal products for aviation, went on strike for three days against layoff plans. At the end of March, a one-day general strike briefly paralyzed the country as opposition to continuing wage cuts grew stronger.

Volvo workers must link their struggle against the 40-hour week to these international struggles. This requires the establishment of an independent action committee in Ghent as well. It would enable the workers to plan further steps in their struggle and make a direct appeal to their colleagues in the US, throughout Europe and internationally.

The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) launched the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) on May 1. This global initiative aims to develop a genuine, broad-based movement of the international working class capable of beating back the attacks of the capitalist class.

The WSWS and the Socialist Equality Parties associated with the ICFI will do all they can to help the workers in Ghent build action committees. At the same time, they need a conscious socialist strategy. The murderous "profits before lives" policy throughout the pandemic and the international turn of the ruling class toward war, fascism and dictatorship demonstrate the bankruptcy of the capitalist system.

The struggles developing around the world show a different way forward. The working class must prepare to take political power, expropriate the capitalist oligarchs, and establish an international planned economy based on social needs, not private profit.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site