

“We were fighting the union, and we were fighting the company.”

United Auto Workers moves to rapidly shut down Volvo Trucks strike after dubious passage of new contract

Tom Hall, Ed Hightower
16 July 2021

The United Auto Workers (UAW) is moving rapidly to shut down the month-long strike by nearly 3,000 Volvo Trucks workers at the New River Valley (NRV) plant in Dublin, Virginia, following Wednesday’s contested vote that the UAW claims narrowly approved a new contract by 17 votes. The UAW forced workers to vote on the exact same contract that they rejected by 60–40 margin last Friday.

Widespread skepticism persists among workers about the result of the vote. The UAW, moreover, is completely ignoring demands from workers for a recount of the ballots. Workers have pointed to a number of irregularities in the ballot counting, including an hours-long delay and the fact that the union official in charge of the ballots, Missy Edwards, had been openly campaigning for a “yes” vote. In a since-deleted Facebook post, Edwards claimed that a “no” vote would not continue the strike, but only result in workers missing out on signing bonuses.

“They are making us return to work [Thursday] because of their fake-ass ballot!” wrote one worker. “Now what do we do? How do we get away from that kind of corruption? When they [UAW officials/corporate Volvo] are pulling the strings and we can’t prove it?”

Volvo workers had the “option” of returning to work either Thursday or Friday, UAW Local 2069 announced on its Facebook page, but Monday work is mandatory. One worker, apparently skeptical that the union and company were using this as a trap to victimize workers, replied: “Screenshotted this. After the level of trust our leadership has earned in this battle, I’m keeping receipts now. You know they won’t fight for us.”

Wednesday’s maneuver is the culmination of a flagrantly undemocratic campaign by the union to override the democratic will of workers and impose a pro-company contract.

This is what has happened over the past three months: First, Volvo management and the UAW worked out behind closed doors a contract that they were both determined to get through. On April 17, the UAW called a strike with the aim of preparing

the ground for pushing through the agreement. The UAW shut down the strike two weeks later, on April 30, ordering workers back on the job before they were even able to see the first tentative agreement (TA).

Despite bullying threats by then-Secretary Treasurer Ray Curry (who two weeks ago succeeded Rory Gamble as the union president), the first TA was voted down by a 90-percent “No” vote. The UAW tried again with a “second TA,” which was voted down by a nearly identical margin.

The leading role in organizing opposition to the UAW-backed contracts was played by the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee (VWRFC), which mobilized workers independently of the UAW. Facing a rebellion by workers, the UAW felt that it had no choice but to call another strike. It then proceeded to systematically isolate the striking workers, starving them on \$275 in strike pay and enforcing a blackout aimed at preventing other auto workers from even knowing it was happening.

The Volvo workers and the VWRFC fought to break free of this isolation, and the strike began to get growing support from autoworkers in Detroit and from workers internationally, including workers at the Volvo Cars plant in Ghent, Belgium, who launched a wildcat walkout last week against a management–union agreement to extend the workweek.

Workers at the Macungie, Pennsylvania, plant run by Volvo subsidiary Mack Truck also recently formed their own solidarity committee, pledging to do everything they could to assist the strike.

It was at this point that Volvo management and the UAW collaborated to shut the strike down as rapidly as possible. A “third” TA was announced on July 1, which the UAW claimed included “major gains,” but was largely a rehash of the agreements rejected by 90 percent. On July 9, in the face of a campaign of lies from the UAW and threats from Volvo, workers again rejected the agreement by 60 percent.

In response to this act of defiance, Volvo declared that it was going to implement the agreement despite its rejection. The

UAW responded to this dictatorial act of open strikebreaking by organizing a “re-vote” on the same agreement, which it claims miraculously passed by 17 votes. It has proclaimed the strike over and ordered workers back to work.

The way in which the UAW forced through the agreement reflects extreme weakness, not strength. They have secured a sellout contract at Volvo at the cost of exposing themselves as little more than a scab operation. However, for the UAW it was more important to shore up its credibility with the company than the workers.

“Everybody knows the International [union] cheats,” an NRV worker told the WSWS. “Lots of them are going to jail. I wouldn’t trust them as far as I can throw them. ... Why are we voting the same thing we just voted down? They said it was a legal requirement. I think it was just to scare people. Then there was a claim about the bonus money. They said since it was their final offer, we had to vote again. ... They didn’t give us the whole contract, never.”

The worker added: “When we go back, a lot of people will turn in their union cards. I want to. I’ll save the \$70 per month. We were fighting the union, and we were fighting the company. People needed money and went back to work. The union had the money to pay more in strike pay.”

Another NRV worker said, “The union is there to keep people in line for the company, without the company having to be the bad guy all the time. ‘They can do that, yes. Vote me in, I want to sit on my ass and get a big paycheck.’ They don’t work on the line with me.”

Looking forward, he said their struggle “could pay off for Mack workers. Maybe we can help Mack out when their contract comes up. The Big Three: if those guys and gals get a good contract—we always get what they get—that would be huge. It’s all about the union trying to make us swallow a nasty pill.”

“Workers should demand a recount and a revote,” a worker from the John Deere Dubuque Works plant in Iowa said. “The UAW announced similar very close results during our 2015 contract negotiations, and many workers were suspicious and demanded recounts. The other thing I want to say is Volvo has so much money. They’re bigger than Deere worldwide. With such profits, I can’t believe the UAW negotiators would accept such a deal that doesn’t meet the demands of workers.

“If the UAW were a true workers organization, they would hold contract negotiations for every company on the same day of every year. By doing that, they could shut down entire industries by calling out everyone on strike. Imagine if Deere, Ford, Volvo and other workers all went on strike. Massive industries shutdown.

“That’s what’s needed. But the UAW doesn’t want the working class in power because they don’t work on behalf of us, the workers, they work on behalf of the companies.”

“That’s a fix,” said a supporter of the rank-and-file committee at the Faurecia Gladstone plant in Columbus,

Indiana. “That’s a f*****g fix, any way you look at it. I knew they were going to do that.” He added that the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers had pushed through a similar rotten concessions contract at the Gladstone plant at the beginning of 2020. He noted that only 26 votes against were counted, even though workers in the shop had counted over 100 “no” votes among people they knew on the floor the day of the so-called ratification.

“The UAW was determined to put this contract through by hook or crook, and that’s what they did. The UAW, the miners, the teachers unions—they’re all crooks. They are going to do what the company wants regardless.”

“That sounds like Larry Robinson and the others at UAW 892,” said a worker at the Faurecia plant in Saline, Michigan. “When you look at the story [of Volvo], it explains everything that has happened to me and other auto workers. They can do what they want. None of the labor laws really apply.”

In September 2019, UAW Local 892 sent the 2,000 workers at the Faurecia Saline plant back to work after only eight hours on strike under the same concessions contract that they were striking against. The contract included the expansion of low-cost, temporary part-time labor, attacks on medical benefits and inadequate pay raises that were quickly eaten up by inflation.

“I am talking about how dirty they did the Volvo workers—17 votes!! Really? Are we supposed to believe that was a fair vote after they voted it down by 90 percent? If it is that close, you have to have a revote, or an investigation. [But] you can’t have the union investigating themselves. You can’t have the company investigating them because they are in bed with them.”

However, he added that the struggle at Volvo has set an example for workers everywhere and inspired workers to take up the fight against the attack on living standards, medical care, retirement and safety conditions on the job.

“The unions use their connections to force these things through,” he said. “I would really like to see the rank-and-file committees challenge the unions on a regular basis daily in whatever way they can.”

The Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee is urging workers to join and build the committee by contacting it by email at volvowrfc@gmail.com or by text at (540) 307-0509.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact