

“The Volvo workers have taught us you should resist. Don’t take the knee. Stand up for what you want.”

Veteran building trades worker speaks on the Volvo Trucks strike

Barry Grey
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The World Socialist Web Site spoke with Rob, a veteran operating engineer in the Kansas City area and regular reader of the WSWs, on the significance and lessons of the month-long strike by Volvo Trucks workers in Dublin, Virginia.

The nearly 3,000 workers at the New River Valley plant conducted a courageous struggle on two fronts, against the highly profitable transnational corporation and the pro-corporate United Auto Workers. After the workers had voted down three concessions contracts agreed to by the UAW, the company declared an impasse and said it was imposing the last tentative contract. The UAW aided and abetted this strikebreaking by ordering the workers to vote again on the deal they had just rejected 60 percent to 40 percent, and declaring that whatever the outcome of the revote, they would have to return to work on Monday, July 19.

Under highly suspicious conditions, the UAW announced late Wednesday night that the revote had passed by 17 votes.

The struggle was led by the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee (VWRFC), formed by militant workers with the assistance of the Socialist Equality Party and the WSWs. The committee, via the WSWs, challenged the news blackout imposed by the UAW and the corporate media and mobilized support from autoworkers and other workers across the US and internationally. Volvo Car workers in Ghent, Belgium carried out a wildcat strike against company plans to unilaterally extend their work hours two days after WSWs campaigners leafleted the plant to inform them of the strike by Volvo Trucks workers in Virginia.

Rob began the interview by referring to the video posted on the WSWs last week of two members of the VWRFC discussing their struggle against Volvo and the UAW and its critical importance for workers all over the world.

Rob: I was struck in the first place by the fact that the gentlemen had to hide their identities. Because I do believe that there would be retaliation from either the UAW or Volvo itself. So, I thought that was the right thing to do. But at the time, it was sad that they had to do it, that we live in a society where speaking the truth is grounds for retaliation.

What I mainly remember from the video is them acknowledging the fact that people who had previously voted ‘yes’ were going to vote ‘no’ this time around, just because of the way the UAW was basically forcing another vote, which I thought, if it actually happened, was a good thing.

Barry Grey: What do you think about the news blackout on the strike that was imposed by the UAW, the AFL-CIO, the mainstream media and the pseudo-left organizations allied to the unions and the Democratic Party?

Rob: To me, it just shows the power of the oligarchy, that they can keep everything solid when there is a group of individuals who are trying to get their voices heard. The fact that there were 3,000 workers on strike and yet you never heard about it, and I’m sure if I wasn’t speaking with you and following the WSWs, I would never have heard of it.

BG: You say that it shows the power of the oligarchy, which is true. But doesn’t it also show the tremendous fear of an independent movement of the working class?

Rob: Yes. I mean, if they weren’t fearful of it, they wouldn’t be trying to silence it. I would like to believe that it is heartening and motivating to others, because my understanding is that they got a little bit better than what the first offer was. Not, you know, what their demands were, but they did get a little better.

My experience has been that when we’ve been kicked down and we’ve been lied to, everybody kind of gives up. So, I’m hoping that other people will see that they didn’t get everything they wanted, but they got better. So, let’s

keep trying.

BG: What do you think was revealed about the role of the UAW and the unions in general?

Rob: They were shown to be treasonous. They should have basically been fired and removed from their offices and replaced by others who were actually working for the workers.

But unfortunately, the way our country is run, that didn't happen. Other actions were treasonous to the rank-and-file members. I mean, the whole time that they were out on strike, the officials were still getting their six-figure paychecks.

BG: And they were giving only \$275 in strike pay per week. And do you know how much money is in the UAW strike fund?

Rob: If I remember correctly, I think it's around \$800 million.

BG: Do you see a connection between the pandemic and the growing number of strikes?

Rob: I think it's happening, with jobs being cut permanently. The companies are trying to get more for less, get their workers to work harder, get more productivity out of them.

What I've seen in my industry, what used to take 20 guys to run is now down to three or four. I think that's what could be happening globally, that they're trying to squeeze every little bit out. And then, with the lack of protections they have as far as medical is concerned. People are thinking, 'Enough is enough! We've given, we've given, we've given—and now it's time to get.'

I think the pandemic has kind of exposed that. As a union member, you know, we're always told the company's hurting, this is the best they can do. Because it's been a bad year, yadda yadda yadda. But it's never a bad year.

One of the tenants in the industrial park where I work is T Mobile. The president of T Mobile, counting stock options, made \$137 million this year. You can't tell me they're having a bad year if they're paying the president 137 million.

BG: What do you think about the initiative fought for by the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party for the formation of rank-and-file committees at workplaces, independent of the unions?

Rob: Honestly, if there is to be any advancement in workers' rights, that is the only way to go. Because like the UAW has demonstrated with the blackout and the nonsupport, with the strike pay and stuff like that, they've shown that they're not for the workers. But I think with a rank-and-file committee, you could eventually gain the majority. For the members, the union is corporate-owned and does what the corporation says.

Basically, I think what the Volvo workers have taught us is that you should resist, and maybe the next group would do better. And that keeps progressing. Don't take the knee. Stand up for what you want. They were out for four weeks when all they were getting was \$275. That's a long time. That's brutal on a family. It shows a lot.

BG: What do you think needs to be done going forward? What do you think is necessary for workers? What strategies should workers develop in order to fight back?

Rob: I think, as we've discussed before, that education on the history is critical. Not the history that the oligarchs want to push, but to actually know what happened, and, you know, how it happened. That would be important and would solidify the workers.

Just from the conversations that you and I have had, there is so much that was not taught to me. And I've got a bachelor's degree. So, I've got four years of college. And there's so much I still was not taught.

BG: The Volvo strike is, to this point, unique in that there is a more class-conscious leadership among the workers that is independent of the so-called union, in the form of the VWRFC. The workers have immense social power, but the question is, are they politically conscious? Do they, as you pointed out, know their own history? Do they have a program and strategy? For example, the question of the Democratic Party is a huge question. The SEP gets attacked as 'sectarians' because we refuse to support the so-called unions and we refuse to support Biden and the Democratic Party. Should workers support the Democratic Party, do you think?

Rob: I do not. I've voiced many times in conversations that I don't think there is a separation between the Democratic and the Republican parties. I honestly believe it's all one party. I mean, and they might have different names and their goals might be slightly different. But overall, they have the same goal, which is to exploit the working class. So, it's a class question. So therefore, the working class needs its own party. I don't believe the Democratic Party would be that.



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