

“We’re going to be in a battle”

Volvo Trucks workers remain defiant after UAW sellout of five-week strike

Jerry White
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Volvo Trucks workers returning to work today in Virginia say it is “going to be a battle” with management after the sellout of their five-week strike by the United Auto Workers (UAW). The nearly 3,000 Volvo workers at the New River Valley plant in Dublin, Virginia return to the factory in a confident and militant mood after striking two times over the last four months and rejecting three, and more likely four, UAW-backed concession contracts.

Last Wednesday, the UAW claimed its proposal for a six-year labor agreement, already rejected by nearly two-thirds of the workforce on July 9, had passed by only 17 votes out of the 2,369 votes cast by workers. Amid widespread accusations of vote fraud, the UAW quickly shut down the strike. UAW President Ray Curry cynically declared, “The democratic process played out at Volvo Trucks.”

Although some workers voluntarily returned late last week, the first full shifts began late Sunday night and early Monday morning. Management has made it clear it plans to speed up the assembly line and impose long hours of mandatory overtime to make up for lost production during the strike.

“Our focus now will be on getting trucks to customers as quickly as we can,” Franky Marchand, vice president and general manager at the Volvo Trucks plant, declared in a statement last week. Pointing to a shortfall of thousands of trucks, a supervisor’s “talk sheet” said, “Current demand of trucks exceeds industry capacity for 2021” and “Rest of year will not be smooth.”

“It’s going to be a crazy rest of the year, with the impact of the strike and the parts shortage,” a Volvo worker told the WSW. “On Monday, workers are going to talk to each other, see what the company is implementing and find their footing. We have a long road

ahead with the bosses. They’re always fudging the numbers, but one worker who returned last week said they had 60,000 trucks on the order board.

“That means tons of overtime. I guarantee they will try to impose a 10-hour day, without overtime payments, even though they removed it from the earlier agreement we voted down. The UAW never showed us the full contract, and they are always adding things without letting us know. I have no doubt they would like to give the 10-hour shift to them, but if they try workers are going to tell them to shove it.

“Management is going to try to put the screws on us, but it is not like before. If they press too hard, workers will walk out again. The union will be nowhere around. The local officials can’t even show their faces in general assembly, the weld shop or anywhere else. Volvo may have a lot of orders, but it is not doable. We were out for more than a month, and they lost at least \$50-60 million. They could have spent that money to give us a good contract, but they wouldn’t.

“The co-pay on the healthcare is going to be 85-15, instead of the 90-10 we had. It’s going to cost my family \$8,000 to \$10,000 more a year. That’s going to happen to a lot of people. For the younger workers, it’s going to take six years to reach top pay and a lot longer if they are hit by layoffs.”

“I am sure we are going to get a motivational speech from the main boss,” another Volvo worker told the WSW. “Workers feel we have the upper hand, especially because of the way the company treated us. We were out for more than a month, and workers feel they were empowered by the strike.”

The worker scoffed at Curry’s claim that Volvo workers went through a “democratic process” to end up with the concessionary contract. By “democracy,” he

said, “The UAW means you vote and vote until you get it right.”

The worker warned that Volvo and the UAW might use the new contract at the New River Valley plant in Virginia to slash jobs and whipsaw Mack Truck workers in Pennsylvania, Maryland and other states into accepting even deeper cuts when their contract expires in 2023, or even before. Volvo workers currently paint truck cabs that are shipped to the company’s Macungie, Pennsylvania plant where Mack trucks are assembled.

“In the grand scheme of things, they are moving assembly operations to a new building as part of their \$400 million expansion at the New River Valley plant here. They will be using universal cabs for both Volvo and Mack-branded trucks. We’ll be painting them and shipping them north to Pennsylvania. We used to build both Mack and Volvo trucks here, but they stopped because of production problems. Now the different models share so many parts they might do that again to cut costs. They could use the concessions they got here to shift production from Macungie and take away their jobs. I would be more than happy to unite with the Mack Truck workers and defend all our jobs and livelihoods.”

To lead the fight against the sabotage of their struggle by the UAW, the Virginia workers formed the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee to rally opposition to the concession contracts and fight for the expansion of their struggle. The VWRFC established contact with Mack Truck workers, including in Macungie where workers have formed their own rank-and-file committee.

“We told the Mack workers: ‘Look what we did in two months. You have more time to build your rank-and-file committee. We were in their spot trying to figure out what to do on the fly and how to implement it. They have time to build their committee in advance of the big changes they’re going to face.’”

The worker explained the importance of the rank-and-file committee in the Volvo workers’ struggle. “There were plenty of naysayers about the committee at first. But then everybody was like, ‘What is the committee saying? We heard management. We heard the UAW. Now we want to hear what the committee is saying.’ Eventually even the naysayers were saying, ‘The committee is the only credible source of information.’”

“The UAW always says this is the best you are going to get. You have to jump on it, and research it and the publish the truth for all the workers to see,” the worker said.

The other worker added, “We need to keep progressing

with the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee. We went from a thorn in their side to a real fighting force. Workers are asking why pay dues to fight the people you are paying dues to? We need to build our committees and unite with workers at Mack, autoworkers in Detroit and Volvo workers around the world.”

Analysts for the auto industry are worried that the rebellion by Volvo workers will spark a far broader movement of workers to overturn decades of UAW-backed concessions. These concessions have reduced autoworkers from the highest paid industrial workers in the US to highly exploited workers with starting wages equivalent to fast-food jobs.

According to an Associated Press account, “Kristin Dzikczek, senior vice president at the Center for Automotive Research, an industry think tank, said rank-and-file union members flexed their muscles in the labor dispute by rejecting two agreements endorsed by union leadership.

“It shows members in future contract talks that the first or even second deals agreed to by union leaders can be improved,” she warned. “This changes the dynamic quite a bit. If members don’t see the first deal as the best they can get, then it’s a self-fulfilling prophecy.”

In other words, the Volvo workers have proven that the working class can challenge the decades-long collaboration of the UAW in the systematic impoverishment of workers. The lessons of this struggle now must be taken to every section of the working class to expand the national and international network of rank-and-file committees and launch an industrial and political counteroffensive by workers around the world.



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