

Volvo workers issue statement: “Where we are, what we’ve gone through and what’s next in our struggle”

Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee

19 July 2021

This statement was issued by the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee as workers at the New River Valley plant begin to return to work today after the conclusion of a more than month-long strike last week.

Last Wednesday, the United Auto Workers union claimed that its third tentative agreement with Volvo passed by a margin of just 17 ballots in a revote on a concessions contract that workers had rejected just days earlier. Despite the end of the strike and the imposition of the company’s terms, workers have told the WSWS that they are returning to work in a militant mood, ready to continue the fight against management’s demands for speedup.

Volvo workers can contact the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee at volvowrfc@gmail.com or by text to (540) 307-0509.

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Where we are, what we’ve gone through, and what’s next in our struggle

July 18, 2021

Brothers and sisters,

Monday, many of us begin to return to work, after the UAW claimed its third tentative agreement with the company passed by just 17 votes last Wednesday. Many aspects of the revote remain highly dubious, given the supposedly narrow margin, the UAW’s explicitly stated desire to see this contract pass and their dishonest conduct throughout the entire process.

However, setting aside the accuracy of the vote, the conclusion of the strike and the return to work does not mean the end of the fight for the rights of all workers at NRV. Rather, it only marks the beginning of the next stage of the struggle. But to successfully navigate this next stage, we must first review and understand the experiences through which we’ve passed.

At the outset, we wish to state that the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee is immensely proud of having fought alongside our thousands of brothers and sisters over these past three months. For weeks, we collectively held firm against one of the biggest corporations in the world and defied the demands that we must sacrifice while its investors get billions. Our stand will serve as a beacon for the many workers struggling against the very same issues.

To our brothers and sisters who did vote yes and thought it was necessary to end the strike: Our bonds of solidarity are no less profound. We understand the very difficult financial situation that many faced, given the meager \$275 a week in strike pay the UAW allotted, and that this was not an easy decision to make. A vote for the contract was by no means an endorsement of its terms, let alone of the UAW.

To the many brothers and sisters at Mack, at auto plants and at other workplaces throughout the country, we extend our deepest appreciation for your solidarity. To the workers in other countries who expressed

support for our strike, especially the Volvo Cars workers in Belgium, we wish to say that your words and support immensely encouraged, strengthened and inspired the workers of NRV. It has become clear to us how essential the solidarity of the international working class is for the success of any struggle.

Finally, we want to express our gratitude to the *World Socialist Web Site*, which provided us with so much invaluable advice and information—about Volvo, about the UAW, about the history of other workers’ struggles. While all the corporate media and the UAW were blacking out the strike nationally, the WSWS worked to break the blackout and bring the strike to the attention of workers everywhere. We also wish to note that the WSWS did not require agreement with their political program as a condition for their unwavering support for our strike.

Now, let us collectively draw the lessons of this experience. What happened?

To begin with the events of this month, a “third” tentative agreement was announced on July 1, a little over two weeks ago, which the UAW falsely claimed included “major gains.”

This contract, which Volvo and the UAW now assert is in effect, significantly increases health care costs for both active workers and retirees, kept raises roughly below 2 percent annually for the top of the pay scale, does not provide across-the-board cost-of-living raises to keep up with inflation, rebrands the tier system into a years-long “wage progression” system, and gives greater leeway for management to penalize and discipline workers. Of course, these are only the concessions revealed in the UAW’s “highlights,” and we must carefully study the full contract to see what else is in store.

Last Friday, on July 9, despite a campaign by both Volvo and the UAW for ratification of the contract, the majority of workers made clear that it was inadequate, rejecting the agreement by 60 percent.

This is roughly the point at which our rebellion changed from being viewed as an irritation for Volvo and the UAW to a real threat and danger. The strike was gaining support among Mack workers as well as workers internationally. The company’s orders, by their own admission, were put at risk, and so Volvo and the UAW worked out a plan to attempt to break the strike quickly and brutally.

First, the UAW announced to us—speaking on behalf of the company—that Volvo was going to impose the agreement despite our rejection, an open act of strikebreaking. The UAW then said it was organizing a “revote” on the same agreement, a completely undemocratic action, which it attempted to cover over with false suggestions that it was legally required.

The UAW then proceeded with a campaign to convince us that we had no choice but to surrender, that the contract would be in effect even if we

voted no, and that all we would “gain” is the loss of our signing bonus. Local 2069 President Matt Blondino and Chair of the Election Committee Missy Edwards both lobbied for a yes vote. Additionally, we were told that the UAW’s misnamed “Solidarity House” headquarters was opposed to the strike continuing, and that it would end by the weekend regardless of the outcome of the revote.

Despite this, there remained very significant opposition to the deal, particularly as more workers learned of the support and strike action by Belgian Volvo Cars workers.

On Wednesday night, the UAW delayed announcement of the results by more than three hours, longer than earlier votes, during which it was undoubtedly consulting with UAW headquarters. Then, it announced the deal had miraculously passed by just 17 votes. It told workers within 30 minutes that the pickets were being closed down “as we speak.”

This immediately prompted an outcry by workers, with many alleging a fraud or calling for a recount, which the UAW has completely ignored. But even if we were to concede that the ballot count was accurate, it does not change the fact that not only the revote, but also the entire so-called “contract negotiation” process overseen by the UAW, was completely undemocratic and essentially illegitimate from beginning to end.

First, the UAW extended the previous contract with the company by 30 days, allowing Volvo to stockpile trucks. Given the widespread sentiment for a strike, with a roughly 97 percent strike vote, the UAW felt they would not be able to get a contract through without allowing some limited job action. It called the first strike on April 17, with the aim, however, of preparing the ground for securing passage of their previously worked out agreement with the company.

Two weeks later, they abruptly shut the strike down, ordering us to return to work without showing the first tentative agreement, let alone holding a vote on it. After the “highlights” were released, however, it became clear that the deal completely failed to meet our needs. Despite threats by Ray Curry, who was then UAW secretary-treasurer and head of the Heavy Trucks Department, and has now been appointed UAW president, opposition to the first TA was overwhelming, and it was voted down by a 91 percent margin on May 16.

Within less than a week, on May 20, the UAW then announced it had a new tentative agreement with the company. Curry falsely claimed that it “made even more solid gains toward fair pay, benefits and job security protections,” but the agreement was in fact only cosmetically different from the first contract.

Despite the best efforts of the UAW and the company, the deal was again voted down overwhelmingly on June 6, by almost the same 90 percent margin. Facing this rebellion by workers, the UAW felt that it had no choice but to call another strike on June 7.

The union proceeded to isolate the strike, starving workers on just \$275 in strike pay and enforcing a blackout aimed at preventing autoworkers from even knowing it was happening. It did nothing to oppose the company’s aggressive strikebreaking moves, such as cutting off our health care and other insurance and bringing in scabs. As much as it could, the UAW withheld vital information from us, including what it was demanding or discussing with the company.

Nevertheless, a majority of us rejected its third contract with the company in the first vote on July 9, as we have already reviewed, despite an all-out campaign by the UAW to sell the deal via lies about how good it was and threats of what would happen to us if it was rejected. It was only through a last-ditch and desperate effort on the part of Volvo and the UAW, dramatically escalating the strikebreaking operation and carrying out a mockery of a “democratic process” in Wednesday’s revote, that they were able to barely secure passage of the contract, or so they claim.

What is revealed by these events? We believe that the following conclusions must be drawn:

1. The UAW represents the companies, not the workers, and no amount

of pressure will change that. Far from responding to our overwhelming rejection of their deals with Volvo by reversing course and working to achieve our demands, the UAW instead reacted by doubling down on its information blackout and deepening its conspiracy with the company, which culminated in the assistance it provided Volvo in getting the third TA implemented through the revote last week.

2. While the UAW has shown it is not capable of meeting our needs, that does not diminish or remove the necessity of a collective, rank-and-file organization of workers to defend and fight for our interests. The Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee fought throughout the struggle to unify all workers, to give voice to the needs of all the generations, to combat the lies of Volvo and the UAW and to find the path to win the strike. Many workers at NRV reached out to us and communicated with our committee during the strike, telling us that the no votes would not have been as substantial as they were if it were not for the statements of our committee.

3. For the next fight to be successful, whether at Volvo, Mack or elsewhere, it must broaden its scope beyond one or another plant, mobilizing the real strength of the working class. We cannot combat multinational corporations like Volvo at just one factory. They operate with a global strategy, and so must we. The support of workers in Belgium, Australia, England and other countries showed that workers internationally are able to recognize they are facing the same issues, and want to unite in a struggle against them.

This work of linking up with other workers has already started, and it must be developed even further. Our committee has begun to coordinate with workers at Mack Trucks in Pennsylvania who have founded their own rank-and-file committee, as well as workers in other states. We make a particular appeal to workers at John Deere, who are facing their own contract struggle under the treacherous UAW in the coming months, to carefully study the lessons of our experiences and to form rank-and-file committees like our own.

Moreover, the betrayal we have faced is in no way unique to autoworkers. Right now, Frito-Lay workers in Kansas are on strike after rejecting a contract supported by the union there. Warrior Met coal miners have been on strike for more than 100 days, isolated by the UMWA. The USW just imposed a concessions contract on steelworkers at ATI after a months-long strike. The unions as they exist today simply do not serve the function for which they were originally created in the 1930s.

A real movement of workers must come from the bottom, not from the bureaucracy. The building of a powerful rank-and-file movement—of the workers, by the workers and for the workers—is the task facing all workers everywhere.

Such a movement is on the order of the day. We live in a society that is massively unequal. While we struggle every day to put food on the table for our families and pay our bills, a small percentage of the population lives in unimaginable extravagance. Their salaries are not only in the hundreds of thousands, but in the millions and tens of millions, all of which comes from the wealth that we collectively create. And amidst a pandemic that has killed millions, their wealth has only increased.

To Volvo workers at NRV, we say: The fight continues. Opposition and anger are inevitably going to reignite as the full reality of this new contract comes to light, and as the company tries to enforce speedup to make up for lost production. We appeal to you to join our committee and help us build it as the organization which will lead the struggles still to come.



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