

# UAW president hails “labor-management” partnership following sellout of Volvo strike

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Less than a week after United Auto Workers President Ray Curry conspired with Volvo Trucks management to shut down the five-week strike in Virginia and ram through a contract previously rejected by workers, he wrote a feature column in the *Detroit News* Tuesday titled “UAW works with employers for union members.”

The *Detroit News*, a Republican Party-aligned newspaper and longtime mouthpiece of the auto bosses, regularly publishes columns by the UAW president, Teamsters President James Hoffa and other Michigan union bureaucrats who have proven their worth to big business.

In his July 20 op-ed, Curry dispenses with any suggestion that unions should have an “adversarial” relationship with the corporations and touts the UAW’s long-standing embrace of corporatism and labor-management “partnership.”

“[B]eyond the conflict and headlines of members’ demands during collective bargaining and in workplace issues like grievances,” Curry declares, unions and employers “must still partner to drive this nation’s economic engine.” The UAW president adds, “Good employers who succeed understand that a happy, productive workforce is essential to corporate success and corporate profits.”

Nowhere in Curry’s column is there a single mention of the months-long struggle by nearly 3,000 Volvo Trucks workers in Dublin, Virginia, the most important battle by UAW members in years, if not decades. That is because the experience demonstrated the irreconcilable conflict not only between Volvo workers and the Swedish-based multinational giant, but also between the workers and the UAW.

As director of the UAW’s Heavy Truck Department, Curry drew up the contract proposals which Volvo workers repeatedly rejected. The UAW-backed deals guaranteed “corporate success and corporate profit” by imposing sharp increases in out-of-pocket medical expenses on workers, maintaining the hated two-tier wage system, and providing a meager 2 percent annual wage increase for top-paid workers. Under the current rate of inflation, the latter would result in a 20 percent cut in real wages over the six-year contract signed by Curry.

After workers decisively defeated the UAW’s pro-company proposals in May, June and on July 9, the union colluded with management to impose its “last, best and final” offer. When Volvo threatened to reopen the factory with strikebreakers, Curry ordered the local union to hold a revote on the last rejected contract and to make it clear to striking workers that they would be sent back to

work under the company’s terms no matter what the outcome of the vote. On July 14, the UAW announced that the deal had passed by 17 votes. Amid widespread charges by rank-and-file workers that the UAW had manipulated the totals, Curry cynically claimed the “democratic process played out at Volvo Trucks” as he shut down the strike.

The contract that Curry and the UAW imposed will guarantee the further impoverishment of Volvo workers. And while both the union and Volvo falsely claimed each of the contracts was the “best they could do” and that substantial improvement in wages and benefits were unaffordable, just this week Volvo reported second quarter profits of roughly \$1.12 billion, bringing its total 2021 earnings to \$2.5 billion so far.

“The UAW lied to us when they said this was the best the company could do,” a Volvo worker told the WSWs after the profit report was released Tuesday. “They’re making record profits. Once people see what the UAW negotiated away, whenever those bastards on the hill finally publish our contract, all hell is going to break loose.”

Curry is a part of a long line of UAW presidents—starting with Douglas Fraser, who was appointed to the Chrysler board of directors in 1980—whose entire careers in the UAW apparatus have been based on the corporatist doctrine of labor-management “partnership,” i.e., that there is an identity of interests between the corporations and workers. This policy has entailed both the ever-closer integration of the trade unions with management and the capitalist state and the severe deterioration of workers’ living standards.

In his column, Curry declares, “The UAW has proved since its very beginning that an employer’s success opens the door for a UAW member’s success at the bargaining table. We’ve worked on a united front in building a strong economy, enhancing job creation and developing better standards of living. This is true whether we are working together on the factory floor, at the bargaining table or competing in this global economy.”

In fact, the “united front” between the UAW and the corporations is one directed *against* the workers.

Despite Curry’s claims, “labor-management” partnership and corporatism has not been the guiding principle of the UAW “since its very beginning.” The socialist-minded workers and left-wing militants who led mass industrial struggles like the 1936-37 Flint sit-down strike understood that the working class had wholly distinct and antagonistic interests in relation to those of the

capitalist owners of the giant industries.

The anti-socialist purges by then UAW President Walter Reuther in the 1940s, however, led to the consolidation of the UAW based on the defense of capitalism, nationalist support of the geopolitical interests of American imperialism, and the political subordination of the working class to the Democratic Party, with a similar process playing out within the other trade unions.

The globalization of capitalist production in the 1970s and 1980s exposed the bankruptcy of the nationalist program of the UAW and other unions, who abandoned any resistance to the employers. The unions joined in the savage downsizing of large sections of industry and the relentless reduction in workers' share of the national income in the name of making American capitalism "more competitive."

During this period, the UAW bureaucracy developed new sources of income from the ownership of corporate shares, positions on company boards, joint labor-management "training" programs (as well as the bribes funneled through them) and investments from multibillion-dollar retiree health care trusts. This enabled the union's top executives and army of staffers to shield themselves from the impact of their anti-working-class policies and become affluent based on a share of the wealth extracted from the working class.

With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the UAW has not only sacrificed the livelihoods of its members for corporate profit, but also their lives. In an effort to conceal this, Curry praises the UAW's role in the so-called Detroit Three COVID-19 task force set up in March 2020.

"Faced with a deadly pandemic and no test to determine exposure, nor a vaccine to protect workers and their families, the UAW and the Detroit Three collaborated and shut down factories to save American lives," Curry claims in the *Detroit News* column. "These actions by the task force, and the role the task force played in identifying protocols for returning to work, saved lives and led other industries to adopt these same protocols and policies."

These are grotesque lies. The truth is the UAW did everything it could to prevent the shutdown of the auto factories, even as hundreds of workers were being infected and dozens of UAW members were dying from exposure in the factories. It was only a series of wildcat strikes by autoworkers, starting in Europe and spreading to Canada, the United States and Mexico, that forced the closure of the auto and other industries. These were rank-and-file rebellions against the UAW, including wildcat actions by Fiat Chrysler (now Stellantis) workers in Michigan, Indiana and Ohio.

The safety protocols the UAW and the corporations put in place after the two-month shutdown were only window dressing to pave the way to reopen the plants by mid-May 2020. Once the factories restarted, the UAW colluded with management to conceal information from workers about outbreaks and further deaths. Most recently, the union agreed to drop mask-wearing and social distancing requirements to allow the companies to ramp up production, even as the highly dangerous Delta variant is erupting and tens of thousands continue to be infected every day.

To justify his call for even greater collaboration with the corporations and the US government, Curry cites the challenge that China, the European countries and other competitors pose to

US corporations in the race to dominate electric vehicles and other automotive technologies. "[T]here is also a role between employers and the UAW to ensure the United States does not fall behind in adopting this new technology," Curry declares.

Like the UAW's demands that autoworkers endlessly sacrifice to compete against workers in Japan and other countries in the 1980s, Curry's campaign over electric vehicles will entail even more painful wage and job cuts. Curry is signaling to the corporations that the UAW is ready and willing to be a full-fledged partner in the transformation of autoworkers into a low-paid temp workforce, and that the union will support the US ruling elite in its future trade wars and military confrontations with China and other nuclear-armed competitors.

The betrayal of the Volvo workers is only one of many that Curry and the UAW are preparing. But the rebellion at Volvo this year and the emergence of the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee (VWRFC) as a new voice and leadership of the workers points the alternative way forward.

In opposition to the union's efforts to isolate the strike behind a conspiracy of silence, the Volvo workers, with the assistance of the WSWs, organized the VWRFC and established connections to Mack Truck workers, autoworkers in Detroit and other cities, and Volvo workers in Australia, Canada and Belgium.

Already analysts from auto industry think-tanks are warning that the Volvo workers will inspire other workers to overturn decades of UAW-backed concessions. The repeated defeats of UAW contract proposals "changes the dynamic quite a bit," Kristin Dziczek, senior vice president at the Center for Automotive Research said. "If members don't see the first deal as the best they can get, then it's a self-fulfilling prophecy."

The lessons of the courageous struggle of the Volvo workers against both the company and the UAW must be taken to every section of the working class, in order to prepare the necessary industrial and political counteroffensive of the working class against the global capitalist profit system.



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