“Workers are starting to wake up”

Tensions high in Volvo Trucks plant at end of first week back after strike

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Tensions remain high inside the Volvo Trucks plant in Dublin, Virginia, as workers complete their first week back after being on strike for five weeks. For most workers, today will be their last day before a regularly scheduled two-week summer shutdown for maintenance and equipment upgrades at the New River Valley (NRV) plant.

Nearly 3,000 workers conducted a courageous fight against both Volvo and the United Auto Workers (UAW). The UAW colluded with the Swedish-based multinational to impose a six-year contract, which will continue to boost profits at the expense of workers’ wages, benefits and working conditions. Since mid-April, the workers struck twice and rejected three UAW-backed agreements before the union forced a revote on the company’s “last, best and final offer” on July 14. The UAW claimed the deal passed by 17 votes out of the 2,369 ballots counted and shut down the strike.

The new contract will impose higher out-of-pocket health care expenses, force younger workers to labor six years or more to reach top pay and allow the continued imposition of forced overtime. Raises for the top-paid workers average only 2 percent a year, well below the current rate of inflation of 5.4 percent.

Since the return to work there has been a virtual standoff in the factory. Supervisors want to ramp up production to make up for lost output during the strike. Workers are steadfastly refusing to accept extra duties and faster line speeds. Anger has been further fueled by the release of Volvo Group’s second-quarter profits of $1.1 billion earlier this week, bringing its total income for 2020 to $2.4 billion.

“The first shift got their checks today, and it did not include the bonus or the raises from the new contract,” one worker told the WSWS. “Everybody gets two checks before the shutdown, and the raises are supposed to take effect right away. That didn’t happen, but the amount of money the UAW is taking out in dues is going up,” he said.

According to workers, management is scouring the plant for volunteers to work during the two-week shutdown, but they are getting very few takers. “Usually, they canvas once or twice a week for overtime, but every single day the bosses are coming around and asking, ‘You sure you don’t want to work?’ People are telling them, ‘Hell no, I’m not working.’ Workers are saying, ‘I’m going to work for what I’m worth to them.’ This is not going to be short-term but from now on.”

Newer workers who have been employed less than 90 days have no choice but to work during the shutdown, the worker told the WSWS. He also said there is a rarely used stipulation in the contract that allows management to make workers with fewer than three years work during the summer downtime if they get vacation time another time of the year.

“They are using that stipulation now with the full backing of the UAW to round people up for work,” the worker told the WSWS. “They’re going to run 20 trucks a day, which is a lot fewer than the 60-70 they ran before the strike.”

He also said workers are concerned that Volvo and the UAW might try to bring in 10-hour workdays after the break. “They said they took their demand for a four-day, 10-hour ‘alternative work schedule’ out of the contract, after we voted that one down. But there is fine print in the contract saying the UAW and the company can revise it by ‘mutual agreement.’ The union never showed us the full contract, and we only saw the tip of the iceberg of what is going to be changing. If they try to do this, it is going to open one big can of worms.

“It’s the little things they kept hid that’s going to start coming out. We found out this week the new hires who didn’t get their 90 days in before the strike but stood out on the picket line all these weeks with us are not going to get the signing bonus. That’s not right. They deserve it just as much as anyone else.

“We should have voted down the contract on principle, even if they tried to send us back to work. A lot of people are mad, and not a lot of work is being done. But all over the

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country and the world, workers are starting to wake up. If we don't, they're going to try to take everything away from us."

A veteran Volvo worker told the WSWS, "Overall, I thought the third TA [tentative agreement] sucked. Our last two contracts were brutal, but this one was the worst. The biggest complaint I've heard is on health insurance. For workers who are married and/or have children, the insurance cost increases have really upset them. Several people I know said they are turning in their union cards. They're going to use the dues money of $70 per month for their health insurance premiums instead. They figure they don't get anything in exchange for their dues money anyway."

The worker explained how the UAW conspired with the company to ram through the contract. "Of course, there was economic pressure to vote 'yes.' Many of my friends were dead up against it, terrified. Some of them care for their grandchildren and said, 'I have to take whatever they offer.'

"Several workers who ended up voting 'yes' were in the process of applying for a home mortgage, and the bank told them they would have to cross the picket line by August or lose their approval and the home they were getting. They were in the middle of this huge purchase—their home—and felt that they had to vote 'yes' because the bank was basically forcing them to."

Commenting on the pittance the UAW paid in strike benefits, the worker said, "Where do they come up with $275 per week? I know they have millions in the strike fund. The UAW took a long time on both strikes in April and June to get us our checks."

He continued, "There was never any communications from anyone at the UAW during both strikes and leading up to them. It is sickening the way everything was handled. They were so misleading and underhanded through every bit of it."

To oppose the sabotage of their struggle by the UAW and provide workers with a voice and real leadership, workers formed the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee (VWRFC). With the assistance of the WSWS, the VWRFC broke the UAW's news blackout and deliberate isolation of the strike and won support from Mack Trucks workers, autoworkers in Detroit and other cities and Belgian Volvo workers.

The VWRFC is campaigning for the expansion of a national and international network of rank-and-file committees to conduct a real fight to overturn decades of union-backed concessions.

Daimler Trucks workers speak out on UAW betrayals

The VWRFC recently received a letter from a truck worker wanting to build a rank-and-file committee at his plant in North Carolina. The letter, which the committee shared with the WSWS, said:

"I am a UAW member employed by Daimler Trucks of North America in Gastonia North Carolina (Freightliner) for the last 25 years. We are currently under a UAW umbrella contract agreement with four other Daimler plants, which include Mt. Holly TMP, Cleveland TMP, and Thomas Built Bus, also Atlanta PDC.

"I completely understand the struggles your local has been going through, not only fighting the company you work for but also fighting the UAW who represents you at the bargaining table. My biggest concern is not only being sold out by the UAW but also the integrity of the ballot box. I would like to see a more transparent voting process with a way to verify the ballots placed in the box.

"We have been sold out by the UAW the last four contracts with the workers giving up more and more concessions each time. Speaking for myself and a lot of our membership from Daimler Trucks in Gastonia we stand with you on your fight. Please let me know if there is anything we can help with."

The contract for 6,000 Daimler workers expires in 2024. The 2018 contract signed by Curry is virtually the same as the one at Volvo. This includes the repackaging of the two-tier wage system with a six-year "progression" to top pay, which will be even longer as workers are hit by job cuts by Daimler, Volvo and other truck manufacturing giants.

Another Daimler worker in North Carolina told the WSWS, "Ray Curry came out of this plant. I worked with him on second shift for 10 years, and I watched him grow as he went through the ranks of the UAW, and he's not the same Ray Curry I knew.

"I never thought I would see the day when the company would decide what the last and final offer is. That's basically what the UAW did with Volvo. It's really upsetting to me that the UAW would even consider taking contracts like they offered Volvo and like they offered us. They told us this was our best and final offer and that we better take it.

"They show you highlights, just what they want you to see to get you to vote 'yes.' They're not going to show their hand. It's a sad day for the labor movement when you have the UAW in bed with the company."

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