The Volvo strike in Virginia, what are the lessons for Amazon workers?

Baltimore Amazon Rank-and-File Committee
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Volvo Trucks workers from the New River Valley (NRV) plant in Dublin, Virginia returned to work last week after their five-week-long strike was betrayed by the United Auto Workers union. We encourage NRV Volvo workers to continue to build the rank-and-file committee founded during the struggle and to support similar formations in workplaces around the globe.

At the same time, we denounce the premature ending of this strike by the UAW and oppose the fraudulent agreement foisted upon the membership. On July 9, after 2,900 workers voted down a third proposed contract offered by the company by a resounding 60 percent, Volvo resorted to outright strikebreaking and announced it would impose the terms of the rejected contract anyway.

While the full terms weren't even provided to the striking workers and have yet to be announced, NRV workers know they will be given 2 percent yearly wage rises over the course of the 6-year contract, which do not even keep up with inflation. In addition, they will face increased out-of-pocket costs for healthcare.

The UAW acquiesced to Volvo's demand that the strike end and proceeded to force workers to vote on the same contract twice in order to "get it right." As the NRV Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee wrote of this policy: "The UAW is attempting to make it appear as though it will be a legal requirement for us to end the strike and surrender even if we reject the contract, that heads they win, tails we lose." The revote passed under suspicious circumstances on July 14, by only 17 votes.

If the UAW were truly interested in putting up a defense of its members, it would have continued the strike and expanded it to other Volvo facilities until a reasonable agreement was presented. What did the UAW stand for in this struggle? It starved Volvo strikers on $275 a week while sitting on a huge strike fund amassed through member dues. It also kept its membership outside the NRV plant in the dark about the strike, issuing no statements across its various platforms calling for solidarity from the membership with their brothers and sisters in Virginia.

The bravery shown by the Volvo strikers during this weeks-long two-front confrontation has been an inspiration to workers around the world who are seeking to improve their conditions after a year of working through the pandemic and with consumer prices now on the rise.

During the strike, workers in the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee raised demands for a 25 percent raise, $4,000 signing bonuses and the end of the two-tier system that forces new hires to receive lower pay than their more senior co-workers. They also called for a rejection of the 10-hour day Alternative Work Schedule, full funding of retiree healthcare benefits and no increase in healthcare costs for employees.

The Baltimore Amazon Workers Rank-and-File Safety Committee supported your strategy to win the strike. This included demanding the UAW provide full income for striking workers from the UAW's $800 million strike fund, unifying the struggle with Volvo-Mack workers at other plants, breaking scab operations, sending rank-and-file representatives to link up with other strikers in industries outside the auto sector, and the end to all secret negotiations between the union and the company.

Our fate is connected. What happens at Volvo affects what can happen at Amazon warehouses. Our bosses recognize the connection between struggles in workplaces as seemingly different as the Volvo truck lines and the Amazon work stations. Amazon sent its executives to Virginia to get Volvo to whip the strikers

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back to work. The ruling class realizes the potential for the Volvo struggle to become a rallying point for a wider movement against the profit system itself. Workers must draw the same lessons from the Volvo struggle and fight together.

The working class must respond with equal and opposite force against efforts to confine its struggles to one workplace. The bosses want to contain these struggles locally? Then we must break them out into the world sphere.

That is why this struggle is such a watershed moment for the working class. This strike was beginning to break out of the confines of the corrupt and politically bankrupt union framework and also starting to go beyond Volvo's ability to suffer continued production shutdowns at a key point in the supply chain. Volvo workers at NRV were receiving support internationally at a time when rank-and-file workers are realizing the need to break out of the shackles imposed upon them by the unions.

Already, Volvo Cars workers in Belgium have gone on a wildcat walkout. Worker struggles are ongoing or erupting in countries all over the world, including the United States. These developments underline the importance of the International Committee for the Fourth International's call to form the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). The IWA-RFC aims to "unify workers in a common worldwide struggle, opposing every effort by capitalist governments and the reactionary proponents of the innumerable forms of national, ethnic and racial chauvinism and identity politics to split up the working class into warring factions."

Workers must learn the lessons of what happened at NRV. The forming of new independent rank-and-file committees such as the one established in NRV will be even more essential going forward. It was the failure of the UAW that lost what would have been an easily winnable strike. Workers had the will to fight, but their union leadership was working against them.

For Amazonians, this experience proves that organizations like the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Unio n (RWDSU), which tried to organize fellow coworkers in Alabama early this year, are deeply entrenched in the political establishment and have no interest in uniting workers. In the case of the RWDSU, Amazonians in Bessemer, Alabama were not told anything about their would-be union's record of forcing workers in other industries to stay at work even as members died from COVID-19.

The UAW Local 2069 in NRV forced its members to stay at work throughout the pandemic. According to workers there, as many as a third of the plant has suffered from COVID-19. Likewise, when the strike broke out, the UAW issued no statements to its members about the strike and what the issues were.

In both cases, the pro-corporate unions were an obstacle to the continuance of any struggle. At the same time, the struggle in Virginia showed the strivings for unity within the working class. In contrast to the unions, the rank-and-file committees—established with the aid of the Socialist Equality Party before and during this struggle—were essential to advancing this struggle through providing workers with accurate information and a strategy for victory.

Volvo workers, Amazon workers, retirees, teachers, nurses, students, all sections of the working class, remember NRV! Build the network of rank-and-file committees! Fight for the demands of the workers at Volvo and of the working class around the world!

To learn more about the Baltimore Amazon Rank-and-File Safety Committee or about establishing a rank-and-file committee in your place of work, contact us online at get in touch with *World Socialist Web Site* and International Amazon Workers Voice, or get in touch by phone at 484-466-8841.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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