

# The lessons of the 2021 Volvo strike

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The events at Volvo Trucks this year have crucial theoretical, political and historical significance. What took place marks the most important convergence in decades between a major struggle of industrial workers and the program and activity of the Trotskyist movement.

For roughly three months, nearly 3,000 heavy truck manufacturing workers in Dublin, Virginia fought with increasing consciousness against both Volvo, one of the largest multinational companies in the world, and the corporatist United Auto Workers “union.” At an early stage in this fight, with the close collaboration, assistance and encouragement of the Socialist Equality Party, workers formed the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee (VWRFC).

In the course of the struggle, the VWRFC became the rallying point for broad sections of workers and their opposition to further concessions. In a combined effort with the *World Socialist Web Site* and the SEP, the VWRFC worked to promote workers’ aspirations, develop their fighting capacity, articulate their interests and demands, and unify workers both at the New River Valley Plant and across Volvo’s operations internationally. The VWRFC and the WSWs combated the lies and maneuvers of Volvo and the UAW and fought to cut a path to win the strike.

What was the context within which the Volvo strike emerged? Over the last three years, there has been a growing number of strikes and other forms of class struggle internationally in which our party has played an increasingly central and direct role.

Beginning in 2018, there was the wave of teachers’ strikes in a number of US states. In 2019, there were the wildcat strikes by tens of thousands of auto parts workers in Matamoros, Mexico early in the year. In the US in the early fall of 2019, there was the strike by 40,000 GM autoworkers, during which the party developed important connections between workers in the US and those in Silao, Mexico. There were also the strikes by 20,000 AT&T workers, the walkout by over 30,000 Chicago teachers and the strike by 3,600 workers at Mack Trucks, which is also owned by Volvo. Workers in these struggles came almost immediately into conflict with the unions.

These were part of a global upsurge of the class struggle, with major strikes in France and other European countries, in India, and in Brazil and virtually throughout Latin America. Mass demonstrations against inequality and attacks on democratic rights broke out seemingly in every corner of the globe.

As we’ve explained, the coronavirus pandemic emerged under these conditions of growing class struggle as well as advanced political crisis, acting as a “trigger event” accelerating and intensifying the underlying contradictions of capitalism.

In early 2020, as the enormity of the danger posed by the pandemic began to become clear to masses of people, workers sought to take action, defying the criminal attempts by both the corporations and the trade unions to sacrifice health and lives to maintain production and keep profits flowing. In March, wildcat strikes among autoworkers spread from Italy to Spain and Canada, and then to a number of US auto plants.

The slogans and political line of the ICFI found increasingly direct expression in these actions. The Socialist Equality Party statement calling for a shutdown of the auto industry to save lives was read by tens of thousands as the work stoppages spread. The plants in Canada and the US where job actions took place were ones where we had influence among workers, developed over a number of years.

Just two months later, mass global protests were ignited by the police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, including the largest demonstrations in US history. Protests took place essentially in every major American city, and in many small towns, encompassing young people, workers and broad sections of the population of every race and ethnicity.

Over the course of 2020, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) intervened in and sought to give leadership to a wide range of struggles against the ruling class’ “herd immunity” policies, working with autoworkers, educators, Amazon workers and transit workers to initiate rank-and-file committees independent of the corporatist trade union bureaucracies.

Our party has played a particularly important role in the struggles of teachers and educators against unsafe school reopenings over the last two years, helping educators establish rank-and-file safety committees in a number of states and cities, as well as in other countries, and countering the grotesque lies of the ruling class that children are immune to or do not transmit the coronavirus.

## Class struggle expands in 2021

Entering into 2021, the struggles of workers have taken on a new and more determined character. They have been fueled by widespread anger over the catastrophic handling of the pandemic, the accompanying social devastation and the obscene growth of corporate profits and the fortunes of the billionaire “pandemic profiteers.” Since the beginning of the year, the following strikes have erupted, with some still ongoing:

- Hunts Point produce workers in New York City
- St. Vincent nurses in Massachusetts
- Columbia University and New York University grad workers
- ATI steelworkers in Pennsylvania and other states
- Warrior Met Coal miners in Alabama
- ExxonMobil oil workers locked out in Texas
- Cook County nurses and state workers in and around Chicago
- Frito-Lay workers in Kansas and Pepsi workers in Indiana
- Volvo Cars workers in Belgium
- Electrical workers in Turkey
- Vale nickel miners and Rio Tinto smelter workers in Canada
- Tea plantation workers in Sri Lanka
- Shipbuilders in South Korea
- New Zealand nurses
- Teachers, transit workers and railway workers in Brazil

- Food delivery workers in Germany

In all of these struggles, workers have been in conflict with the unions, fighting against both the concessions the unions previously granted to employers and the new ones they are seeking to impose.

This was the case at Volvo, where workers were determined to reverse the conditions agreed to earlier by the UAW.

First, there was the multi-tier wage and benefit system, which the UAW has assisted the corporations in spreading throughout the heavy/agricultural equipment (Deere, Caterpillar) and auto industries over the last 25 years, repudiating the principle of “equal pay for equal work” for which earlier generations had fought. The tier system has been used as a means of permanently lowering the wages of new hires and rolling back pensions and other benefits. Most importantly from the standpoint of the companies and the union, it has served as a strategic wedge to pit different sections of workers against each other in an attempt to block a unified struggle and undermine solidarity.

While wages for newer workers at Volvo were slashed significantly after 2011, pay raises for “Core Group,” i.e., “legacy,” workers were frozen or consistently kept below inflation, lowering their real wages.

The company continually shifted more and more health care costs—premiums, deductibles, maximum out-of-pocket charges—onto the workers, further eroding their take-home pay.

This was done not just for active workers, but also for retirees, who had been promised that their health care costs would be taken care of after having devoted their working lives to the company. Retirees have been increasingly unable to live on their fixed income and compelled to take on work in their 60s, 70s and beyond.

Thus, prior to 2021, anger had been building up at Volvo for years, particularly when workers were forced by the UAW and the company to continue laboring throughout the pandemic, generating billions in profits for Volvo and its wealthy shareholders.

It should be pointed out that our efforts to reach workers at the plant began more than a decade ago, in 2008, when WSWS reporters spoke to workers on the picket lines during a strike. We continued to report on struggles at the New River Valley factory in subsequent years and extended our contact with Volvo and Mack workers.

#### **April 17-April 30: The first Volvo strike**

As any careful review of events makes clear, the UAW was working from the outset with a plan to impose Volvo’s demands for new concessions on the workers.

This involved centrally the near-total information blackout by the UAW on its discussions with the company, which the union would continue throughout the months-long struggle. When the UAW would infrequently speak to workers of the “negotiations,” it would do so as a mouthpiece for Volvo, conveying management’s lies and threats, and adding on lies and threats of its own.

In the middle of March, the UAW extended the previous contract with the company—a five-year concessions agreement forced through in 2016—for 30 days, defying the workers’ 97 percent strike authorization vote and allowing the company to stockpile trucks.

Hoping to contain and head off workers’ opposition by calling a limited strike and prepare the ground to push a deal through, the UAW sanctioned a walkout beginning on April 17.

It quickly became clear that there was broad interest in and receptivity to the perspective of the WSWS among the workers. On April 20, the article written by Comrade Ed Hightower, “Striking Volvo truck workers in Virginia demand restoration of UAW-backed concessions,” was widely

circulated on Volvo and Mack Trucks workers’ Facebook groups. Comrades in the region set to work systematically contacting workers via social media.

Because of its previous theoretical and political work, the party was sensitized to the emergence of working class opposition at Volvo and anticipated that conflict with the UAW would inevitably arise. Thus, the SEP mobilized to act on the possibilities present in the situation and provide crucial strategic and tactical advice and organizational support to the workers in their struggle.

And as we were expanding our network of contacts and beginning to hold more frequent discussions with workers, the ICFI was simultaneously preparing to launch a major international initiative.

On April 24, the ICFI published the statement “Forward to the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-file Committees.” It advanced critical conceptions that guided the intervention among Volvo workers. The statement explained:

For the working class to fight back, a path must be created to coordinate its struggles in different factories, industries and countries in opposition to the ruling class and the corporatist unions...The IWA-RFC will work to develop the framework for new forms of independent, democratic and militant rank-and-file organizations of workers in factories, schools and workplaces on an international scale. The working class is ready to fight. But it is shackled by reactionary bureaucratic organizations that suppress every expression of resistance... New pathways for mass struggle must be created.

#### **The formation of the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee**

Early on April 30, a Friday at the end of the second week of the walkout, word began to spread among workers that a tentative agreement had been reached between the UAW and the company, and that the UAW planned to call off the strike. No information about the terms of the deal was released, provoking growing distrust and anger among the workers.

Later that afternoon, the party organized a meeting with a small group of Volvo workers. After reviewing the maneuvers and duplicity of the UAW, and warning that it was being done with the aim of engineering a sellout, we won agreement with the workers that they would establish the basis of a rank-and-file committee, as well as their support for the publication of a statement calling for opposition to the UAW’s sabotage of the strike.

At our prompting, workers explained during the meeting what they felt they needed to achieve a decent standard of living and proper working conditions, irrespective of the impact on the company’s bottom line. This led to the formulation of the following initial demands, which would continue to be developed throughout the struggle:

1. A 25 percent across-the-board wage increase to restore the income lost over the last three UAW contracts.
2. The abolition of the multi-tier wage system and the restoration of the principle of “Equal pay for equal work.”
3. Full overtime payments for work over eight hours a day and weekend work. No forced overtime! One full-day notice before any scheduling of overtime, with the right to refuse with no retaliation.
4. An end to speedup and harassment by management. We are not inmates of a prison but self-respecting workers.

5. Workers' oversight of safety protocols and social distancing to stop the spread of COVID-19. The right to halt production and close the plant for full cleaning, with guaranteed compensation to workers, if there are COVID outbreaks.

A few broader points should be made here on the workers who participated in the committee at various stages. As we've noted previously, many in this region in southwestern Virginia previously voted for Trump, including some of those workers who would come into leading positions on the committee itself. There were also other political viewpoints: those who supported the Democrats, either Biden or Sanders. Others expressed anarcho-syndicalist politics. And there were also some who considered themselves socialists.

While explaining our socialist program, we did not set agreement with it as a condition to participate in the committee, or even agreement that the UAW was beyond reform. What was required was agreement that a struggle for workers' interests was needed, and that workers could not wait for the UAW to act.

A sorting out took place. Some workers who participated early in the committee drew closer to us over time. Others drifted away, but then got back in touch later on.

There was a dynamic interaction between the workers coming into struggle and the most conscious factor in the situation, the revolutionary party. Comrades held daily, continuous, wide-ranging discussions with workers: listening, learning about the conditions they confronted, how sentiments and moods would shift in response to new developments.

Party members strove to raise the level of consciousness of workers, not infrequently coming into conflict with their initial, limited conceptions. We explained the class forces at work behind Volvo and the UAW, the role of Wall Street and finance capital. There were discussions on the nature of the UAW and the degeneration of the unions, the history of earlier working class struggles, on identity politics and our campaign against the "1619 Project" and on the Russian Revolution, and what socialism genuinely is, in opposition to its many counterfeits and falsifications.

Throughout our discussions, we stressed the critical importance of workers developing their own initiative, warning them against placing any confidence in the UAW.

The UAW and company management, increasingly fearful of the hearing the WSWs was getting, predictably sought to sow distrust by means of red-baiting and the promotion of anti-communist tropes. While this was not entirely without impact, many workers came to see that the WSWs provided the only honest and truthful information about their struggle, countering the propaganda of the company. Moreover, many—and not only those at Volvo—came to view the WSWs and SEP as the most consistent proponents of the interests of all workers at the plant.

One of the workers on the committee, speaking after the strike, described the change of attitudes among those who were initially skeptical of the committee: "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.'"

### May 1-May 16: Runup to first contract vote

In the 72 hours following the UAW's moves to shut down the first Volvo strike, graduate student workers at Columbia University in New

York City voted to reject a concessions agreement backed by a UAW-affiliated union and ExxonMobil initiated its lockout of 600 oil workers in Beaumont, Texas. The first Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee statement was issued, "Stop the UAW sabotage of our strike! No contract, no work!," as well as a statement of the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* calling for opposition to the UAW sellout.

Most importantly, on Saturday, May 1, the ICFI held its International May Day Online Rally, elaborating and motivating the call for the formation of the IWA-RFC. The rally presented a comprehensive analysis of the global capitalist crisis and outlined the internationalist socialist program necessary to resolve it.

At Volvo, the UAW was able to shut down the first strike, but as information about the deal began to emerge indignation spread rapidly among the workers. The basic terms of the first deal, which the UAW almost certainly received from Volvo and agreed to before the first strike began, would persist throughout subsequent, supposedly new agreements, which contained largely cosmetic modifications. The contract included:

- Continuation of the tier system under the cover of a years-long "progression" to top pay.
- Onerous increases in health care costs for active workers.
- Attacks on retiree health care.
- Below-inflation raises—effectively wage cuts—for the top of the pay scale.
- Extension of working hours and an attack on the eight-hour day through the Alternative Work Schedule. The company and UAW would subsequently claim this was removed in later contract proposals, but this remains to be seen.

While the UAW was seeking to sell this pro-company agreement to workers, former UAW President Dennis Williams, who was president during the last contract at Volvo in 2016, was being sentenced for his part in the scheme to embezzle union funds. The sentencing of his successor, Gary Jones, would follow less than a month later, in June.

Undoubtedly, the years-long UAW corruption scandal, which demonstrated irrefutably that the union was run by dues-swindlers and bribe-takers, played a role in further alienating Volvo workers from the UAW. However, what is significant is that even as the federal government has tried to wrap up its investigation and claim that the UAW's leadership now has clean hands, workers' distrust and hostility toward the UAW has not lessened, but instead increased.

Many Volvo workers rightly suspected even before the contract struggle that nothing fundamental had changed, and those feelings found plenty of confirmation in the UAW's treachery throughout the struggle. The work we have done exposing the material interests of the UAW, its ties to the stock market and the swelling incomes of the union executives, has been an essential element in furthering that process.

In the runup to the first contract vote, UAW Secretary-Treasurer Ray Curry, who oversaw the entire contract process as head of the UAW's Heavy Trucks Department, arrogantly stated that the contract would pass "by 60 percent." Instead, on May 16, workers voted down the agreement by 91 percent.

Just a few days later, the first open letter was issued from the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee to UAW International President Rory Gamble, Curry, and UAW Local 2069 President Matt Blondino.

The letter carefully reviewed the lying maneuvers of the UAW and raised a series of demands directed to the UAW:

First, we will not accept any contract that is negotiated behind closed doors. All negotiations must be supervised by a representative of the rank-and-file workers. We will not accept *another* contract proposal cooked up behind our backs, for the simple reason that this would only produce *another sellout*.

Second, we outline here the minimal basis for an agreement that workers will accept:

- \* A 25 percent across-the-board wage increase to restore income lost over the last three contracts.
- \* Maintain current health insurance rates and coverage.
- \* Fully paid health care benefits for retirees, with no copays or premiums.
- \* End the multi-tier wage system and transfer all workers to top-tier pay and benefits.
- \* Eliminate the Alternative Work Schedule and keep current overtime rules.
- \* Implement a COLA clause to meet the soaring prices of consumer goods.
- \* Five personal days for all workers, not just salary workers.
- \* A \$3,500 contract ratification bonus.

We are not interested in hearing talk about how the company cannot “afford” these demands. Even in the midst of our strike, Volvo reported \$1 billion in profits in the first three months of 2021 alone. The stock price has doubled in the past 12 months. Martin Lundstedt, the CEO, makes \$51 million a year.

Third, any resumption of strike activity cannot be used to starve us into submission in order to get us to agree to the same deal we already defeated. Strikers must be provided with *full income* for the duration of, and from the beginning of, any strike, paid for from the \$700 million UAW strike fund that has been built up with *our dues money*.

Fourth, we will not accept another attempt to force a contract through with lies and threats. Any new agreement must be provided in full to all workers with two weeks for us to review and discuss before a vote.

Workers would tell us the letter spread “like wildfire” throughout the plant, leading to a significant upsurge in interest in joining the committee.

It’s important to stress that these the demands were raised *not* from the standpoint of bolstering illusions in the UAW, but rather of exposing the maneuvers and pro-corporate character of the UAW.

This required that we take into account the fact that while there was overwhelming opposition to the attempts to impose new concessions, and a rank-and-file committee had been established, the UAW still retained control over the negotiations and was continuing its efforts to keep workers in the dark and work out a way behind their backs to get the deal through.

Moreover, despite widespread distrust and hostility towards the UAW, there still remained illusions among workers—even among committee members—in the possibility that the union executives could be compelled to come back with a better agreement, and even that the UAW could be reformed. The challenge was to find a bridge to the consciousness of these workers and a lever both to help them develop their own initiative and to encourage the incipient insurrection against the union bureaucracy.

On May 20, the day after the open letter began to be circulated, the UAW announced its second tentative agreement with Volvo, which was now for six years instead of five. Ray Curry lyingly claimed, as he would with every subsequent deal, that it “made even more solid gains toward fair pay, benefits and job security protections.”

From May 20 to June 6, as the UAW’s selective “highlights” revealed that the deal was little different from the first, opposition and anger mounted in the runup to the vote on the second tentative agreement. The VWRFC gained a growing hearing and more workers contacted it. It issued several statements over this period as the situation developed, analyzing each new turn in the struggle:

- Show us the contract! (May 22)

- Vote “no” to a slave’s contract (May 28)
- We need a strategy to win! (June 4)

On June 6, the second tentative agreement was again overwhelmingly rejected by virtually the same margin, 90 percent, a devastating repudiation of the UAW.

## June 7-July 14: The second strike

The UAW, seeing the extent of the opposition and feeling it could not get its deal with the company through without shifting its tactics, authorized a new strike beginning at noon on June 7.

The same day, the immensely important Perspective column by Comrade David North was published: “Volvo Truck workers in Virginia return to the picket lines: A turning point in the US and global class struggle.” Placing the Volvo strike in its broader historical context, the Perspective stated:

In history there is such a thing as retribution. For all the crimes committed by capitalism against the working class over the past 40 years, the ruling class, in the very process of attacking the working class and vastly enriching itself, has overseen a vast expansion and integration of the capitalist system of production. The most significant and revolutionary outcome of this process—driven by staggering advances in science and technology—is the massive growth in the global working class.

The Volvo workers in Dublin, Virginia are well aware of the fact that the corporation, headquartered in Gothenburg, Sweden, employs almost 100,000 workers in production facilities located in 18 different countries, spanning every continent. Many of these facilities are interdependent, requiring a flow of products from one plant to another. Contrary to the claims of the bureaucracy that resistance to the corporations is hopeless, the workers realize that their potential power, if organized and deployed globally, is immense.

Therefore, the critical issue for the Volvo workers, and the working class as a whole, is that of perspective, program and leadership.

It became clear almost immediately that the second walkout, unwanted by both the company and the UAW, was different from the first. Franky Marchand, the general manager of the New River Valley plant, said in a statement following the June 6 contract rejection that “this action is difficult to understand.”

Volvo responded aggressively, setting out to intimidate workers and break their solidarity. It counted on the UAW’s assistance, which did, in fact, do everything it could to disarm the workers in the face of the company’s attacks.

The company cut off health care and other insurance, sent out termination letters, and began to bring in strikebreakers, who were protected by the police. Marchand issued another statement later that week saying that Volvo would not return to the bargaining table until “the process for the new round of negotiations is clear to all”—that is, until it received assurances from the UAW that it could succeed in securing ratification.

As we explained in a number of statements throughout the struggle, groups and publications such as the Democratic Socialist of America and *Jacobin* magazine, as well as *Left Voice* and *Socialist Alternative*, worked

in tandem with the corporate media and the UAW to black out information about the strike. On the rare occasions when they commented on it, as in the case of *Labor Notes* and the “Valley Labor Report” radio show, they said nothing about the VWRFC, downplayed the treachery of the UAW, and falsified what was taking place.

The response of these organizations was a social phenomenon, reflecting the class interests they represent. They are oriented toward and largely composed of privileged sections of the upper-middle class, including an increasing number of union officials. As we explained, “Both the trade union apparatuses and the pseudo-left organizations view the class struggle as something to be highly regulated and pacified—by them, as they grow wealthy in the process. Thus, the beginning of the rebellion of workers against the corporate institutions called ‘unions’ cannot yet be spoken of, for fear it will spread further and blow apart this set-up.”

These social interests and political concerns also underlay their zealous promotion of the RWDSU unionization drive at Amazon, a top-down operation backed by the highest reaches of the state. One can see the utter hypocrisy of these groups in their hue and cry over Amazon’s efforts to block the RWDSU, through the nefarious and all-powerful on-site mailbox, and their dead silence soon after on the brutal, anti-democratic strikebreaking of Volvo and the UAW.

A sharp contrast can be drawn between the response the organizations of the petty-bourgeois pseudo-left and that of our movement.

Our international party significantly intensified its efforts to break through the UAW-media blackout and mobilize workers in the US and internationally. Just in the first week of the strike, statements of support were published from US, Mexican, Indian, British and German autoworkers and other workers. A number of interventions were carried out at auto plants in Michigan, as well as in Chicago. We drew the connections between what workers were struggling against in Dublin, Virginia and what they were facing in Detroit and elsewhere, explaining the necessity of workers forming new rank-and-file organizations to link up and coordinate their fights.

On June 14, the second open letter by the VWRFC to the UAW’s Gamble, Curry and Blondino was issued. The letter posed the following questions to the UAW executives:

- \* What are your demands in the negotiations with Volvo?
- \* Why are you paying only \$275 a week in strike pay?
- \* What is your strategy for victory?

After stipulating the workers’ demands for the resources needed to win the struggle (strike pay at workers’ full income, the mobilization of workers at Mack and elsewhere), the letter concluded:

We are demanding that a line be drawn in the sand, that this strike result in a clear victory for workers. If they are informed about our struggle, workers throughout the country and indeed around the world will understand that it is in the interests of all workers. They will understand that this is a strike not only for us, but for the future. A successful struggle here at Volvo will strengthen every autoworker, and in fact the entire working class.

If you are not prepared to carry out such a fight, then get out. The rank-and-file will elect a bargaining and strike committee of its own that is prepared to carry out the struggle that is required.

The letter was again widely read and circulated throughout the plant and met with an enthusiastic response. The UAW, for its part, responded with

silence while working in the background on a plan to get the deal through.

The party continued to expand its efforts to mobilize workers in the US and internationally through the second and third weeks of the strike.

On June 17, the Perspective column by Comrade Kishore was published, “Break the isolation of the strike of the Volvo Trucks workers in Dublin, Virginia!”

On June 20, the first of the IC’s interventions among Volvo workers internationally took place, with comrades in Australia distributing material and interviewing workers at the Volvo Group’s Wacol facility in the western suburbs of Brisbane, the capital of the Australian state of Queensland.

On June 22, the call for Mack workers and autoworkers to form solidarity committees was initiated with the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* statement: “Autoworkers: Form rank-and-file solidarity committees to break the isolation of the strike at Volvo Trucks!”

On June 25, a Friday, the UAW announced that then-President Rory Gamble would step down, setting the stage for the appointment of Ray Curry. As we explained in a profile, Curry was and is a “creature of the UAW apparatus, without the slightest connection to the real conditions and struggles of autoworkers.”

On July 1, the same day that Curry began his term as union president, obviously not a coincidence, the UAW announced a “new” tentative agreement with Volvo, the third. The announcement of the deal was the first public statement by the UAW nationally on the strike since its onset.

Curry said of the new contract: “UAW members and their families felt strongly about the need for financial stability gains in this contract and were willing to strike not once, but twice, to achieve those gains... This contract reflects significant gains from the prior two tentative agreements.” As with previous statements, Curry made no attempt to explain the contradiction between his claims that earlier deals were the best that workers could get and his assertion that the latest contract represented “significant gains.”

As before, the UAW refused to release the full contract to entire membership, and set a vote for July 9, roughly one week later.

The following Monday, July 5, marked the beginning of the fifth week of the strike. Volvo had by this point begun to slow production and idle shifts at its Mack Trucks plants in Hagerstown, Maryland and Macungie, Pennsylvania, which have a closely interdependent manufacturing process with the New River Valley plant, although the company would claim that the slowdowns were due at least in part to the microchip shortage.

On July 5, Mack Trucks Allentown assembly workers, with whom we had been meeting, issued a statement initiating a rank-and-file committee and declaring solidarity with the Volvo workers. Comrades in Canada also distributed leaflets at a Montreal Nova Bus plant, a subsidiary of Volvo.

The next day, a WSWS team visited the Volvo Cars and Volvo Trucks plants in Ghent, Belgium, eliciting a powerful response by workers and statements of solidarity. Out of the many important interviews and statements from workers internationally that we published throughout the strike, the article and video produced on this intervention had perhaps the most significant impact on the consciousness of workers at the New River Valley plant, as well as the Mack Trucks workers. A Mack worker told us he was moved to tears after watching the video.

The party’s efforts to connect the struggles of workers internationally had an impact not only on workers in the US. Just two days after the intervention in Ghent, Volvo Cars workers there initiated wildcat action over an attempt to impose an extension of their work week from 37.5 to 40 hours, agreed to by the union behind their backs. Work stoppages continued through the following day.

On July 9, a Friday, Volvo workers again voted down the UAW-backed contract, this time by 60 percent, despite threats from the union about the consequences. While the vote represented a stinging repudiation of the UAW, it was becoming clear that there were greater divisions among the

workers than in earlier votes, and that the economic pressure of a paltry \$275 a week in strike pay was beginning to have the intended effect of eroding support to sustain the strike.

At the same time, the third contract rejection provoked a serious crisis for both Volvo and the UAW. NRV General Manager Franky Marchand stated at the time that it was necessary to immediately end the strike, because “the continued loss of production represents too much of a risk to the future of our business and our facility.” After emergency meetings between the company and the union following the vote, the UAW announced to workers that the company was moving to unilaterally impose the third TA, beginning on Monday, July 12, with the company retroactively declaring it their “last, best and final offer.”

The UAW declared that it would hold a revote on the third TA on Wednesday, July 14, providing cover for and aiding the company’s naked strikebreaking. A worker would later tell the WSWS that the proposal for the revote was made by the UAW to the company.

The WSWS and VWRFC issued statements countering and exposing the lies of the UAW in relation to holding a second vote, and we campaigned again at plants in Detroit and Ghent to mobilize workers in support of the strike:

\* WSWS Perspective: “Class war at Volvo and the fight for rank-and-file committees”

\* Statement by the VWRFC: “Vote NO to corporate threats on Wednesday!”

On the morning of the vote, Volvo workers issued a video statement calling for a rejection of the third TA. The video denounced the anti-democratic moves of the UAW and the company, and, significantly, explicitly appealed for support from workers internationally.

It should also be noted, contrary to the pseudo-left claims that the unions represent workers’ interests, that the workers in the video were compelled to conceal their identities because of the very real danger of victimization by the UAW itself.

The revote on the third tentative agreement took place on July 14. Workers reported to us that there was broad opposition to the deal, with a number of workers who had previously voted “yes” saying they planned to vote “no” this time as a protest against the UAW’s blatant disregard for the workers’ democratic will. However, there were also reports by workers afterwards of the extreme financial pressure many were under.

After a delay of over three hours, the UAW announced a contract ratification by just 17 votes, or 0.3 percent. Workers immediately responded on Facebook with accusations of fraud and calls for a recount or revote, which the UAW ignored.

As we explained in our statements following the vote, regardless of whether there was ballot manipulation, and there was certainly reason to believe that there was, many of those who voted “yes” did not do so out of support for the contract or the union, and the entire contract “negotiation” process overseen by the UAW was fraudulent and illegitimate. Workers were not defeated by the company, they were betrayed by the UAW.

## **The aftermath of the strike**

A statement by the VWRFC issued the weekend following the vote, summing up the lessons of the experience for workers, explained:

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.

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.

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.

On July 18, workers returned to the plant on their first full day back, but now in a newly defiant mood. Workers reported there was hardly any production the first few days. Later in the week, there were reports of workers refusing requests to work during downtime.

This is important. While the contract was imposed, for now, there is a significant section of workers at Volvo—and at Mack Trucks, I would add—who feel a new self-confidence, that they’ve learned in the course of this struggle, and that the next battle will turn out differently.

To this date, the UAW has still not released the full contract to workers, fearful of the anger that continues to smolder. Expressing the mood of many, one worker told us: “A lot of people are mad, and not a lot of work is being done. But all over the country and the world, workers are starting to wake up.”

In the week following, we worked with workers at the Mack Trucks Macungie plant to concretize and formally launch their rank-and-file committee, issuing a statement. This statement has already elicited a strong response from Mack workers.

There can be no doubt that the political representatives of the ruling class are well aware of—and seriously concerned about—the growing influence of Trotskyism among industrial workers.

President Biden visited a mostly empty Mack Trucks plant in Pennsylvania last week, seeking to counter the growth of internationalism via the promotion of his “Buy American” nationalist economic program. At the same time, he reiterated the need for “labor management” partnership, that is, a corporatist alliance of the unions, the companies and the state, which Biden and the Democrats, as well as the DSA and the pseudo-left, view as critically necessary to suppress, contain and regulate the class struggle.

What are the critical lessons of the strike that must be drawn by our movement?

1. Our analysis and perspective have been confirmed in the objective development of the class struggle itself, which has enormous significance.

Long before this year, our party determined that workers would inevitably come into conflict with what are now falsely called “unions,” and that new organizations, committees based on the rank-and-file and independent of the corporatist bureaucracies, would be required to unify workers and provide them a means to fight.

Further, we have explained that there had been an enormous growth of the working class internationally, and that the class struggle would increasingly take on, and would have to take on, a global character.

As we stated as early as 1988, in the ICFI Perspectives Resolution:

It has long been an elementary proposition of Marxism that the

class struggle is national only as to form, but that it is, in essence, an international struggle. However, given the new features of capitalist development, even the form of the class struggle must assume an international character.

Workers are increasingly striving towards and recognizing the need for international unity, but it is through the party that workers have begun to become really conscious of themselves as an *international class*. We saw this at earlier stages in the class struggle in the last two years, with Matamoros (strikers appealing across the border for US workers to join them), the courageous response of Silao autoworkers to the GM strike, and the cross-Atlantic transit worker meetings. In each case, there was a crucial interaction between the program and activity of the party and the objective development of the class struggle.

Our conception that this is the fifth stage in the history of the Trotskyist movement, in which the ICFI becomes an increasingly active and direct participant in the world crisis of capitalism and is being built as the conscious political leadership of the international working class, has found a powerful substantiation in the course of the class struggle itself.

And in relation to this week's extremely important lectures reviewing the long struggle of the Trotskyist movement to unify the working class and counter the reactionary racist politics of the bourgeoisie and upper-middle class, the struggle at Volvo this year again demonstrated that the basic division in society is class, not race, and that the dominant aspect of American society is the class struggle, not racism. White workers, many of whom voted for Trump, fought side-by-side with their black brothers and sisters in the course of the Volvo strike.

While undoubtedly there is political confusion and backwardness that we must combat, the Volvo strike shows that it is the working class, of all races and genders and nationalities, that is *the* progressive and revolutionary class in society, the force we are oriented toward and will build our party in.

2. The Volvo strike marks a new phase in the class struggle, and the period that began with the defeat of the PATCO strike in the early 1980s has come to an end.

There is a growing wave of overwhelming rejections of union-backed concessions deals. These votes reflect not only a new determination by workers to halt and reverse the decades-long union-backed corporate attacks against them, they express as well a shift in the relationship between classes.

Workers are searching for a way to go on the offensive. The contract rejections have been driven not only or primarily by the immediate issues involved, but more fundamentally by the growing anger and opposition in the working class over the obscene inequality that has reached new extremes during the pandemic, and the subordination of every aspect of their lives to the profit interests of the ruling class.

3. The role, initiative, theory and practice of the revolutionary party, the most conscious factor in the situation, was indispensable in realizing the potential in the situation at Volvo. The 2020 Congress resolution is particularly relevant here:

86. The party must patiently explain to workers and youth the nature of the crisis and the strategy of the struggle for socialism. But the need for *patient explaining* must not become a justification for *passive contemplation*. Opportunities to translate *political understanding* into *practical actions* must not be missed. The aim of the party is to lead workers in struggle.

company and the UAW, but it would not have developed the highly conscious, organized and sustained character that it did.

As Comrade Kishore wrote in his Perspective on July 11, "Class war at Volvo and the fight for rank-and-file committees":

Many of those involved in the rank-and-file committee do not yet consider themselves socialists. They want to win their strike, which can and must be won. They are part of an increasingly militant working class that is no longer willing to accept the constant attack on their jobs and living conditions.

The responsibility of socialists is not to stand aside, but to assist workers in the development of their independent organization and initiative while seeking to develop a deeper understanding of the social and political implications of the struggles in which they are engaged.

The events at Volvo this year are a foreshadowing of even more explosive battles to come, which will more and more become the norm everywhere. Our party must carry the lessons of the Volvo strike into the forthcoming struggles, work to systematically recruit workers into the party and expand the network of rank-and-file committees as part of the fight to construct a revolutionary leadership in the working class.



To contact the WSWs and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

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Without the party, there would have been opposition to the attacks of the