Volvo worker describes conditions at Volvo New River Valley Plant after UAW betrayed five-week strike

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A worker at Volvo's New River Valley (NRV) plant in Dublin, Virginia, contacted the World Socialist Web Site *about losing his paid Labor Day holiday due to a loophole under the new six-year agreement at the facility. The deal was foisted onto the plant's 3,000 employees in July after the United Auto Workers (UAW) shut down a five-week strike by forcing workers to vote again on a deal they had rejected a week before. The following interview took place last week.*

Ed Hightower: When did you learn about the Labor Day payment issue?

Volvo Worker: Just yesterday. They didn't put this in any of the highlights [during the contract vote]. I would have remembered it because it directly impacts my life. They didn't deign to share that with us. And of course until you guys started writing about how the full text of the contract wasn't available, that's when [Local 2069 President] Matt Blondino and [Hourly Bargaining Chair] Greg Shank started saying they could show it to us, but only in the back office. Here we are, almost three months after the contract was signed, and they haven't tried to show us anything. It's a surprise that you don't get paid for Labor Day if you have to care for a sick family member the day before.

EH: You were referring to statements of the RFC and WSWS about how the full text of the new contract was not available for workers to read. When was it that Blondino and Shank said you can come see the full contract behind closed doors?

VW: It was about a week before the final vote, the fourth vote, when they pulled out their scare tactics and pretty much scared everybody into voting yes to save the signing bonus, when they made us vote on TA3 again. They didn't share that [losing paid Labor Day] with us at all. And I'm sure there's a lot more Easter eggs in there that are about to pop up. They're actively trying to make people as miserable as possible because they're mad at us for slapping the hand that feeds us, I guess you could say.

EH: And that happens to be the union's hand.

VW: Yeah, exactly.

EH: Did workers who went back into that room read the entire agreement?

VW: I only know of one woman who went back there, and it was a very thick document from what she described. You would have to be there for hours to read the whole thing.

EH: Can you describe this incident in more detail?

VW: I had to take off a few days before Labor Day, in a separate pay period, so I shouldn't have been penalized, at least that's the way it's always been since I've been at Volvo. But apparently they can just say, "you're not getting paid for Labor Day" or any holiday now if you take off the day before or the day after. My family member had a doctor's appointment that was out of state. I didn't get back until around 1 a.m. that day. And I'm financially fine right now because I plan ahead, but for some people losing $200 on Labor Day is going to be a big deal.

EH: You didn't know at the time of the contract voting that there was an impending attack on Labor Day?

VW: We should have known. Matt Blondino is a total sellout. Yeah, it's crazy.

EH: How did you feel about the fact that he claimed you had to vote on TA3—which was rejected by 60 percent—a second time because it was Volvo's "last best offer?"

VW: With a lot of things in life some things are legal but immoral. What they did may have been legal but it was s****y. It was a total betrayal by our union leaders because obviously the company is going to try to do dirty things like that, but our union leaders should not by any means help facilitate that, you know?

EH: When you say it was legal, certainly the union had no obligation to hold a second vote on the same proposal.

VW: No, they didn't. Volvo can say that this is their last, best and final offer, but if you look at the General Mills strike in Australia, they made the same claim, workers rejected it and the company, a US company, was back at the negotiating table that night. Sadly, in our case, 18 votes went the wrong way because of a fear of losing the signing bonus. And if you look at the raise, it's only an extra 8.9 cents per hour over six years. $1,200 isn't a lot of money when you think about what we could've taken out of them, you know?

EH: In fact, those workers who had not been at Volvo for 90 days did not get a signing bonus anyway. I imagine that if they had known before the vote they weren't going to get that signing bonus, they would have voted "no."

VW: Oh yeah, for sure, and a lot of the "yes"-vote people, I still talk to the "yes" voters because they are people and people matter. Even they are disgusted with how they were treated. They did not willingly vote "yes." They voted "yes" because they were bullied into it, you know what I mean?

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EH: Yes, it was under coercion.

VW: Open coercion, which anybody who has read the NLRA, a federal law, prohibits. Now Volvo doesn't have to follow it either. It's morally repugnant.

EH: A basic principle of contract law is that a deal reached under coercion is invalid, there is no freedom to agree in the presence of coercion.

VW: That's an excellent point. There was no freedom to agree or disagree. Matt Blondino's wife was openly promoting a "yes" vote on her Facebook profile. They were being extremely vicious to a lot of people on there.

EH: Missy Edwards, who headed the election committee, made comments supporting a "yes" vote. "Think long and hard about voting 'no'" and things like that aren't some neutral opinions.

VW: It also turns out that while we were on strike, due to COVID, we were eligible for unemployment pay in addition to strike pay and the union never told us that. They were hoping to starve us out and get us to agree to a concessionary contract. We still fought very hard and got a significant raise. But at the same time, they were banking on us not knowing about getting more money because they wanted us to vote out of fear.

EH: But when you say a raise, isn't it a pay cut when you take into account inflation and increased health insurance premiums? "Raise" is their marketing buzzword, but it's a pay cut.

VW: Yes, that's true. Currently, they desperately need 700 workers, and for every 50 they bring in they can only get two or three to stay because all the new people get all the terrible jobs, the ones that break their backs and make them sweat through their shirts. They get these horrible jobs like pounding in windshields or routing air hoses and things like that. They don't want to stay. They don't want to do these horrible back-breaking jobs for a few more dollars than they would get flipping burgers.

EH: The WSWS has been writing on Dana Auto parts company recently. It has a massive COVID outbreak in one facility. A worker in Dry Ridge, Kentucky, had a seizure this year and hit his head. The company did nothing, didn't even call his wife. He died at home after being discharged because he had a subsequent seizure. We interviewed his wife, who said that Dana just works people to death. She said that all he did was work to maintain health insurance and so on.

VW: I read most of what you guys write but had not seen that. That's awful.

EH: The other day a worker reported to us that Dana sprayed disinfectant all over workers during work hours and it made them sick. Another Dana worker in Tennessee tells us that her distribution center is a fire hazard, it's so littered with products that you can't get to an exit quickly.

VW: At Volvo, there was a man who died the other day on the line, he had a heart attack. He had been complaining of chest pains and then while he was working on the line. He had a heart attack right there on the line. The sheriff and OSHA are being extremely tight-lipped about it. They completely shut down that side of the plant where his body was. Nobody was even allowed to get their stuff. They should at least release his name. They did stop the line. But when somebody is complaining of chest pains, you don't keep him working; you send him to the hospital.

It was ridiculous and absolutely tragic. It's sad enough that he died, but he died at Volvo and that's even worse. He should have been at home with his family. But they pull all of these scare tactics like you will get written up if you leave early. He was probably worried about maintaining his health insurance.

EH: I think your attitude toward those NRV workers who voted "yes" is healthy, to patiently explain to that voter that he was tricked. Can you elaborate on how the union and company are treating workers now?

VW: They are being extremely nit-picky about things, especially things that don't really matter. It's more of a psychological harassment now. They are just trying to make people as miserable as possible. Anybody reading this interview will be like "yeah, yeah," and they will know exactly what I'm talking about. I do want to warn other union workers out there about voting "yes" on their contracts, Nabisco and so on, I want them to know what happened at Volvo with local 2069.

EH: It's an important warning bell, and the rank-and-file committees are popping up everywhere in opposition to the betrayals of the unions, including at Dana. They have made a strong appeal to workers at the Big Three auto companies. But eventually the committees will have to lead strikes because the unions have proven that they are only capable of Hollywood stunts and betrayal. But you all at Volvo have sounded the alarm, and I think conditions there under the new contract must be exposed further.

VW: The way I think about it, it's a war. We were one battle. Our battle went much better than it could have gone. But the war is going to be very long and drawn-out all over the country. It's going to be constantly fought at every union local because you know they are all bought out, they all have their Matt Blondinos and Greg Shanks in there. People just need to know you are fighting not just the company but the union as well, the union officials.

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