

“People are raising hell”: Volvo Trucks worker describes impact of contract one year after strike

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Just over a year has passed since the beginning of the struggle by 3,000 workers at Volvo’s New River Valley truck plant in southwestern Virginia. On April 17, 2021, workers at the factory walked out, entering into a protracted battle that was to take on an historic significance far beyond what was initially apparent.

Over the course of nearly three months and two strikes, workers courageously fought against the transnational giant Volvo Group and, increasingly, the United Auto Workers union bureaucracy.

At least three times, workers defied attempts by the UAW to push through pro-company concessionary contracts, voting to reject the first two tentative agreements by massive 91 and 90 percentages. Such a decisive and overwhelming repudiation of union-endorsed agreements was unprecedented in recent decades.

On July 14, 2021, the UAW would claim that a fourth contract vote—illegitimately called by the union on the exact same deal workers had voted down just days earlier—ended in ratification by the highly dubious margin of 17 ballots. The union stonewalled calls by workers for either a recount or revote. Workers nevertheless returned to NRV in a mood of defiance, with production hardly moving in the first days back.

In seeking to reverse brutal concessions previously imposed by the UAW, the Volvo workers’ struggle developed into a rebellion against the pro-company union. The spearhead of this struggle was the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee (VWRFC). The VWRFC, working in collaboration with the Socialist Equality Party, gave workers the organizational means with which to pursue a course of action reflecting the objective interests of the workers themselves.

The VWRFC’s statements and open letters exposed the UAW’s sabotage and leveraged the national and

international solidarity of the working class. The VWRFC distributed hundreds of leaflets across the NRV facility and hosted meetings which connected Volvo workers with compatriots at Mack Truck and workers in Europe and around the world.

A video appeal by two VWRFC workers—using the pseudonyms Rick and Josh—highlighted the global significance of the Volvo struggle and received hundreds of views internationally.

(A detailed timeline of the entire struggle—including two strikes, a return to work, the emergence of support among Volvo workers in Europe, and the anti-democratic “re-vote” on the company’s final offer—can and should be reviewed here.)

Volvo NRV today: “With workers spending so much more to live, people are going to want to fight again”

Like their counterparts at auto parts maker Dana, Newport News Shipbuilding and other workplaces, Volvo workers now live under a contract whose “pay raises” are being devoured by runaway inflation.

In what is now standard operating procedure for union-backed labor agreements, Volvo workers only obtained the full contract book months after the deal was rammed through.

The belated delivery of the contract provides an opportunity to consider the conditions facing Volvo workers now and to review the experience from the standpoint of preparing a renewed offensive against soaring inflation, eroding real wages, compulsory overtime and other grievances.

The WSWS recently spoke to Josh about conditions at Volvo since the strike.

“It took a year, but we finally got copies of the full contract the UAW agreed to, and people are raising hell,” Josh said. “There are so many clauses that say ‘under the discretion’ of the company. So, you have rules, but they’re not rules because the company can break them any time.

“There are things in it that were agreed to after the fact. The union and the company do whatever they want.

“They put on a third shift with bids from current employees, which took four months to fill because no one wants to do it. They started the third shift on Easter Sunday night, after four months of this process. People raised hell, wanting to retract their bids but they weren’t allowed. Previously they didn’t have enough people and now they can’t keep people.

“Many have quit. Many people did retire. Turnover is terrible. Volvo can’t find anyone for what they are paying.”

With inflation soaring above 8 percent, Josh recalled the VWRFC’s demands that workers should be protected from exactly this turn of events.

“Our rank-and-file committee warned workers that we needed COLA [cost of living adjustment] protections in the contract. Now workers are getting killed with inflation. You see people tightening their belts. Guys are driving to work together to save on gas. You can tell things are getting bad.

“Even the farmers out here have quit using fertilizer because it costs so much. Some of the fields that were once so pretty, now they’re filled with dandelions and weeds.”

Josh’s hostility to two of the major drivers of inflation—the war in Ukraine and the 2020 bank bailouts—was pronounced.

The rank-and-file committee is independent of the pro-corporate UAW, so that workers can organize their own struggle.

“The cash given to corporations [in the CARES Act of 2020] was a transfer of wealth, nothing else. All the money goes to the big dogs, and there’s nothing for the little guys. That’s the politicians too, who have their stocks and knew what was happening. They should be hanged.”

Referring to the Biden administration’s escalating military confrontation with Russia, Josh said, “If you really dig into it, this is about resources, just like the US relationship with Saudi Arabia and the Iraq War. The US

is planning to go after Russia’s stuff, its energy and mineral resources. It’s bad that the people in Ukraine are dying—but it is not the Russian people or even the Russian soldiers that are to blame. Most of the soldiers are just kids.

“The way the media reports it the Russians are the bad guys, and the Ukrainians are the good guys. I tell my fellow workers to look at the background of this. I’m afraid my son is going to be dragged into another war that is not worth fighting.”

Josh also described a debacle of an “organizing drive” recently conducted by the UAW at the NRV facility, underscoring the widespread distrust workers have towards it.

“The UAW is trying to unionize a plant that is building a new Volvo truck. The UAW International sent down some of its reps to hold a conference with the workers.”

While management initially told the UAW they could meet with workers on the shop floor itself, workers angrily rejected this, Josh said.

“Management told the workers, ‘Hey, guys, the union is here to talk to you about unionizing.’ The workers said, ‘What the hell is the UAW doing here? We moved to this plant to get away from them.’”

As a fallback, Volvo management permitted the UAW organizers to use an on-site conference room to meet with any interested workers.

“The workers didn’t want them there, and only three or four of the 68 workers showed up for their meeting. The non-union workers are being paid more than workers at my plant. They spend a little more on health care, but it is the same plan. And the non-union workers get weekends off. They wonder why workers don’t want to unionize.

“The jig is up for the UAW. Everybody knows they are for the company. That is why we built the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee. With workers spending so much more to live, people are going to want to fight again.”

The Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee is urging workers to join and build the committee by contacting it by email at volvowrfc@gmail.com or by text at (540) 307-0509.



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