

Mack Trucks layoffs and the fight for the international unity of workers against trade war

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Last week, Volvo Group North America announced plans to lay off hundreds of workers at its Mack Trucks and Volvo Trucks plants in Pennsylvania, Maryland and Virginia over the next three months. Citing the impact of US tariffs on heavy truck orders, the company said it needed to “align production with reduced demand.”

Including earlier cuts in February, nearly 1,000 of the combined 7,000 hourly workers at Mack Trucks Lehigh Valley Operations (Macungie, Pennsylvania), Volvo Group Powertrain Operations (Hagerstown, Maryland), and Volvo Trucks New River Valley Operations (Dublin, Virginia) will lose their jobs. Another 1,300 jobs are expected to be lost at nearby suppliers and businesses.

Volvo Group has been hit by tariffs on steel, aluminum and imported truck components from Canada, Mexico and China, the latter of which supplies at least 13 percent of Mack components.

Since Trump’s April 2 “Liberation Day” trade war declaration, which the president claimed would lead to the “reshoring” of jobs and rebirth of American industry, there have been thousands of layoffs. Stellantis laid off 900 workers in Michigan and Indiana, following 4,500 cuts in Windsor, Canada and Toluca, Mexico. Another 1,000 are idled at the Warren Truck plant. GM has also announced layoffs at Detroit’s Factory Zero and CAMI in Ontario.

In Michigan, the center of the US auto industry, unemployment rose for the third straight month in March to 5.5 percent—the second-highest among US states, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

The United Auto Workers union has done nothing to defend its members’ jobs. On the contrary, UAW President Shawn Fain has redoubled his support for Trump’s tariffs, after applauding the president on March 26 for “stepping up to end the free trade disaster that has devastated working class communities.”

Trump’s trade war measures have nothing to do with defending workers’ jobs. They are part of the ruling class’s efforts to force America’s economic competitors to pay for the decades-long decline of American capitalism, while at the same time re-shoring critical supply chains in preparation for war against China.

In an interview earlier this month with former Bernie Sanders speechwriter David Sirota, Fain made clear that the UAW supported this war drive. Fain stated:

When we eliminate our manufacturing base in this country, we’re going to be in big trouble if we have to defend ourselves. Because when you can’t produce anything, you’re opening yourself up for attack from anyone. I go back to the “arsenal of democracy” in World War II: The way that World War II was won when the United States got involved was, we utilized the excess capacity at our auto plants in this country to build bombers, to build tanks, to build jeeps.

In other words, Fain is promoting not only trade war but world war as a means to rebuild American industry. Such a war would be even more catastrophic than World War II—a conflict that claimed 80 million lives and brought devastating consequences at home and abroad. In the United States, it led to the internment of Japanese Americans, the jailing of socialists, and the imposition of a union-enforced no-strike pledge.

Today, any jobs that are “reshored” will be sharply reduced due to the introduction of state-of-art automation. At the same time, workers in those factories will be subjected to low wages and brutal conditions to boost US “competitiveness.”

The present layoffs are coming on top of and feeding into a global jobs massacre in the auto industry. In the US, the UAW bureaucracy has enabled it through the sellout of the 2023 Big Three strikes.

In 2021, Volvo NRV workers rejected three UAW-backed sellout contracts and the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee emerged as the center of opposition. Its fight won the support of workers globally, including in Volvo’s base in Sweden. In 2023, the Mack Workers Rank-and-File Committee organized the overwhelming defeat of the first UAW contract, before Fain imposed the company’s “last, best and final offer.”

This rebellion and the organizations to lead it must now be developed if workers are to defend their jobs and democratic rights and oppose war.

Will Lehman, a socialist worker at Mack Trucks and 2022 UAW presidential candidate, has called on workers to build rank-and-file committees to oppose the job cuts and expand the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees to unite workers globally. He declared:

We won't win as just the "American" working class. We need to reach out to our class counterparts everywhere, internationally, if we're going to defeat the transnational corporations.

The IWA-RFC is fighting for the international unity of the working class. We can only win through international solidarity—with workers in China, Mexico, Sweden, Germany and everywhere. During the 2021 strike at NRV, the Volvo Trucks Rank-and-File Committee provided real leadership and won support from Swedish Volvo workers who saw they were in the same fight. We have no quarrel with our class brothers and sisters abroad. Our real enemy is the corporations and their shareholders, and the governments that serve them.

What Shawn Fain is doing—lining up behind Trump's tariffs—is a betrayal. These tariffs are not just about economics. They're laying the groundwork for a shooting war with China. The goal is to disconnect from the globally integrated economy. But workers know better. We see every day where parts are made, where they come from. This isn't about "bringing jobs home." It's an illusion. It's an attempt to build a nationalist alternative to the global economy that simply cannot work. We won't win by aligning with these nationalist maneuvers. We need to reach out to our class counterparts everywhere, internationally, if we're going to defeat transnational corporations.

If we're going to defend jobs, it must be through coordinated action from below by the rank and file—not just at Mack, but also at NRV and the Big Three. It needs to be an independent movement against the UAW bureaucracy, the Democrats and the Republicans, with international collaboration because we have no differences with our class counterparts in any other country.

Fain blames deindustrialization not on capitalism but on free trade agreements, like the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Yet between 1975 and NAFTA's enactment in 1994, 3.4 million US industrial jobs were already lost, and UAW membership was cut in half from 1.5 million to 777,000. Throughout this period, the UAW bureaucracy did nothing to defend workers.

Instead, it collaborated with the employers and both capitalist parties in a nationalist campaign scapegoating Japanese workers, fueling anti-Asian racism, including the 1982 beating death of Chinese-American engineer Vincent Chin in Detroit.

At the same time, the UAW adopted corporatism: total collaboration with the companies and suppression of strikes. National walkouts essentially ended after 1982. The UAW split into US and Canadian branches in 1985. Bureaucrats joined corporate boards while hundreds of thousands of workers lost jobs and the once-powerful auto workforce suffered a historic decline in wages and conditions.

With opposition mounting among workers against Fain, Bernie Sanders, the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and other

pseudo-left forces have rushed to the UAW president's defense. *Jacobin*, affiliated with the DSA, published Fain's recent livestream remarks in full, while *The Nation* gushed:

Fain has been a remarkably effective president of the UAW. He'd make an even better president of the USA.

These organizations play a conscious role in tying the working class to the pro-capitalist unions and the Democratic Party. Their role is to contain working class anger while supporting a bipartisan war drive.

The fight for the unity of the working class corresponds to the realities of modern global economic life. The Mack Anthem model, for example, is produced in Macungie for the North and South American markets and contains roughly 15,000 parts sourced from nearly 20 countries. These include engines, transmissions, brakes and electronics from the US, Canada and Mexico; safety systems and software from Germany, France, Sweden and Italy; castings and electronics from China, Japan, Korea, India and Thailand; and subassemblies from Turkey, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Vietnam.

The working class must take as its point of departure the development of the productive forces, including the technological revolution of the past four decades which has made possible the globalization of capitalist production and rendered the nationalist programs of the old labor organizations completely unviable.

To propose rolling back the clock from the global economy to relatively isolated national economies is reactionary and futile.

The real issue is: Who is to control the global economy? The rival nationally-based gangs of capitalists who are impoverishing the working class and preparing for World War III or the international working class? The real alternative to the capitalist onslaught on jobs and living standards, dictatorship and war is the program of world socialist revolution.



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