

16 December 2005

On December 14 officials from the Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU) and Irish Ferries reached an agreement to an end the 20-day-long industrial action at the company, following all-night talks at the Labour Relations Commission (LRC) in Dublin.

The capitulation of SIPTU testifies to the impossibility of workers waging a successful struggle against their employers under the leadership of a bureaucracy whose inflated pay and perks are bound up with a defence of corporate profitability.

The dispute was sparked in September when the company “reflagged” three Irish Sea ferries to Cyprus--a practise it carried out in order to drive down labour costs and conditions. Irish labour laws do not apply on ships under foreign flags.

Irish Ferries offered redundancy to a third of its workforce on the basis that it intended to replace them with lower-paid workers from central and eastern Europe. Some 543 crew members were to be replaced with staff employed on wages of just €3.60 an hour--about half the Irish National Minimum Wage.

On November 24, the company hired security guards to board the Isle of Inishmore in disguise in an attempt to seize control of the vessel, remove the staff and replace them with cheap labour. New staff also boarded the ferry at the same time.

According to trade union sources, the security men boarded the ferry in Ireland as passengers but then changed into their security uniforms in the toilets as the vessel approached Wales. The general secretary of the seamen’s union of Ireland, Bob Carrick, told BBC Radio Wales, “These people went into one of the toilets on the ship and changed into what can only be described as battle gear--they came out in flak jackets and all dressed in black. The crew got an awful fright--they thought they were terrorists.”

The company planned to replace the crew on board with one from Latvia. Following the incident, Irish

Ferries said that it would be forthwith “changing its crew structures to international norms which will bring it into line with its competitors.” It added that the newly imposed crews would replace those crew taking voluntary redundancy and were being taken on board to “familiarise themselves with all required aspects of ships’ operations to enable them to assume their positions in due course.”

One of the marine officers on the ship said of the action, “We have secured the engine room/control room because there’s a presence of--the company has now told us--a security firm on board, trying to remove us from the vessel and replace us with cheap European labour.” Irish Ferries crew members barricaded themselves on board the vessels Isle of Inishmore and the Ulysses. For more than two weeks the ferries remained occupied, moored in Pembroke Dock and Holyhead respectively.

Sympathy action spread, with Irish port workers preventing the company’s three ferries from sailing between Britain and Ireland. The company’s Ireland-France sailing was also paralysed.

On December 9, tens of thousands of workers joined a Day of Action with protests and demonstrations in Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway, Waterford, Sligo, Athlone, Tralee and Rosslare. Up to 40,000 people demonstrated in Dublin, according to estimates.

Among the demonstrators were public and private sector employees, as well as many recently arrived migrant workers from eastern Europe, who are forced to work for rock-bottom wages. Many of those participating carried banners condemning the exploitation of migrant labour and the “race to the bottom” to impose ever lower wages.

A day later workers demonstrated in west Wales in support of the Irish Ferries’ workers. The demonstration was held at the Pembroke Dock.

The moves by the company were clearly of a union-busting character. But this has not prevented SIPTU

from reaching an agreement with Irish Ferries that immediately sacrifices hundreds of its members' jobs and sets a new benchmark in the drive for ever lower wages that will inevitably affect both new crew and what remains of the existing workforce.

In return for a much reduced presence in the company, SIPTU will be asked to suppress all further opposition to attacks on wages and conditions.

SIPTU representative Brendan Hayes announced that the union had agreed to Irish Ferries' plans to re-register its ships abroad in Cyprus and to €11 million in cost savings annually. The deal will likely see 543 Irish staff accept redundancy. The union also agreed to reopen the original September redundancy package offered by the company to those who did not originally respond. They will then be replaced by agency workers employed by Cyprus-based recruitment firm, Dobsons. The replacements are already in place undergoing training.

The three-year agreement stipulates that the foreign crews will be paid the Irish minimum wage of just €7.65 (£5.19) per hour.

Referring to a possible no-strike deal in the agreement, director of human resources at Irish Ferries, Alf McGrath, said the deal "should avoid industrial action for three years."

SIPTU marine branch official Paul Smyth announced that the deal was "something every SIPTU member should be proud of."

On December 14, union officials boarded the Isle of Inishmore in Pembroke Dock to call on the four marine officers who had locked themselves in the ship's engine room to accept the deal. The four, John Curry, Brian Whitfield, Gary Jones and Vincent Hederington, left the vessel the following day after it was agreed to put the deal to a members' ballot. Several other ferries have now resumed sailings.



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