

Ireland: Trade unions paved way for mass sackings at Aer Lingus

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The conditions in which Aer Lingus' was emboldened to sack 1,200 cabin crew were created by the trade union bureaucracy in Ireland.

The mass layoffs followed a March 5 vote by workers to reject a deal agreed by the IMPACT trade union, which accepted 600 "voluntary" redundancies and a 10 percent pay cut. Workers voted against the deal, billed by the unions as "the best opportunity to secure the airline's long term future", by 64 to 36 percent on a 100 percent turnout. The majority verdict represented a determined response to threats by Aer Lingus management to sack over 1,000 workers if the agreement was not accepted.

In response to the vote, Aer Lingus management convened an emergency meeting and delayed announcing their annual figures. A "source" close to the board let it be known that "the nuclear option is always available to us."

The company then announced its intention to sack all 1,200 cabin crew employed in the Irish republic. Of these, 970 are to be re-employed on reduced wages and changed working practices, while 230 will be sacked. Those sacked will receive the statutory minimum redundancy terms. The company has issued a 30-day notice to all staff concerned.

Aer Lingus management are aiming to save €97 million and deliver a blow against workers who have had the temerity to reject company and the trade union recommendations. They clearly consider they can push the sackings through thanks to the unions, whose every move is directed to suppressing measures taken by workers in their defence.

The proposal cabin crew rejected had been agreed by all the Aer Lingus unions during talks at Ireland's Labour Relations Commission (LRC). The LRC brings together leading members of industry, the state and the trade union bureaucracy. On the basis of the LRC agreement, the IALPA pilot's association had previously accepted proposals which included a 15 percent reduction in pilot numbers, a 10 percent pay cut and productivity increases. Around 50 pilots are expected to be removed at estimated cost savings of €15.2 million to the company. IALPA president Captain Evan Cullen justified the agreement as a "massive commitment to Aer Lingus".

The SIPTU services union have also pushed through a vote

amongst ground staff that included pay cuts, a pay freeze and new productivity arrangements. Some 400 voluntary redundancies are being sought.

The attack on Aer Lingus workers is the culmination of measures pushed through prior to, during and following airline's privatisation. Proposed in 1999 and successively delayed, the company was finally privatised in 2006, for €1.1 billion, with the full support of all the major Irish political parties.

The privatisation, in a form recommended by Goldman Sachs, opened up workers to a succession of attacks designed to enhance "competitiveness" in the air travel market. A 29 percent share was taken by rival Ryanair. The budget airline views Aer Lingus as immensely lucrative, provided staff pay and conditions could be reduced to those endured by Ryanair workers. The Irish government retains a 25 percent stake.

While 1,000 workers marched in Dublin in 2001 against privatisation, by 2006 only one token action—a 75 minute stoppage to "let off steam", in the words of a senior trade union official—took place. The primary concern of the unions was to sustain their influence with the privatised operator by maintaining industrial peace, in return for some temporary guarantees and sweeteners on wages and pensions.

Four years later, the initial boosts to pay and pensions have long been forgotten as Aer Lingus has staggered under the impact of recession, fluctuating fuel prices and aggressive competition from its rivals. In 2008 Aer Lingus sought to cut €20 million from labour costs, while altering maintenance contracts to save a further €20 million. As a result of this, in 2008-09 SR Technics, which had purchased the former Team Aer Lingus maintenance company, sacked 1,150 workers and closed down its entire Ireland-based operation.

Last year Aer Lingus employed a new CEO, Christoph Mueller, to push through a drastic re-organisation required to retain its position in a market dominated by much larger rivals. Mueller made clear that he considered the 4,000 workforce was in need of "amputation" rather than "cosmetic surgery." He is reported to be in line for a €4 million bonus if he returns Aer Lingus to profitability.

IMPACT's response to the latest job cuts has been to request "that the Labour Relations Commission (LRC) reconvene the

parties in order to find a mutual solution.” The union boasts pathetically that “Cabin crew workers have proved themselves, over successive cost saving programmes since 2001, to be a loyal and understanding group of workers,” stressing its belief that “despite the very small window of opportunity that exists, before the redundancies are implemented, a negotiated solution that delivers the savings required by the airline provides the best opportunity to secure the airline’s long term future.”

The response by the Irish government and media makes clear that more is at stake than the fate of one airline. The Fianna Fail/Green government is seeking to deepen social, welfare and public sector pay cuts for years on end, to pay for the vast bailouts organised in 2008-09 for the financial sector. At the same time, in order to restore the international competitiveness of Ireland, wages in all sectors of workers have to be driven down drastically. Smashing up the conditions of Aer Lingus workers is a key component of this strategy.

Mueller met with the Transport Minister Noel Dempsey. The Department of Transport issued a statement noting that “the cost base of Aer Lingus is seriously out of line with that of its competitors... The cornerstones of Government aviation policy are competitiveness and connectivity. A viable Aer Lingus is key to ensuring the development of these objectives.”

The *Irish Independent* railed that the cabin crews’ vote “defies logic... but it reflects the attitude within the public sector to pay cuts and reform.” The editorial continued, “Reform is the future and, if it is refused, Government will be left with no option but to pursue more pain.”

The pseudo-left groups are also implicated in the unions’ betrayal at Aer Lingus. Joe Higgins of the Socialist Party is the member of the European parliament for North Dublin, which contains Dublin airport.

Following the closure of SR Technics in 2008-09, Higgins and local Socialist Party councillor and SIPTU steward Clare Daly directed workers towards demanding the renationalisation of the SR Technics operation as “the only practical solution to save the jobs.”

Higgins’ efforts to cultivate a relationship with the union apparatus, the state and government have also determined his approach to the Aer Lingus sackings. The last article to appear on his website dealing with the conditions faced by workers at Aer Lingus was on October 8 last year. This used the company’s announcement of 700 job cuts only to denounce the European Union and the passing of the Lisbon referendum.

Higgins did find time on February 18 to return to the issue of SR Technics, in an article arguing “State must launch a successor to Team Aer Lingus.”

Denouncing Ryanair’s Michael O’Leary for demanding “to be handed over Hangar 6 at Dublin Airport in order to provide 300 aircraft maintenance jobs,” he complained of “the failure of the media and establishment political parties to support our call at the beginning of last year for ALL 1150 jobs to be secured through the renationalisation of the SR Technics

facility which had 3 years of work on its order books.”

Higgins rails against Ryanair’s “anti-union and anti-worker activities”, without mentioning its share in Aer Lingus and then calls for “Team Aer Lingus which was built into a premier company with a worldwide reputation” to be the “model” for the “state to intervene now to re-establish a state owned aircraft maintenance plant.”

The Socialist Party, with no possible good reason, has to date made no comment at all on the fate of the 1,200 Aer Lingus cabin crew.

The Socialist Workers Party (SWP) has only published one article on Aer Lingus, calling for pressure on IMPACT to ensure there could be “no rowing back from this decisive and democratically voted rejection of the plan”. This conceals the fact that IMPACT is in reality offering to impose job cuts.

The betrayal of the trade unions and their apologists finds its consummate expression in the refusal to even broach the issue of a united offensive with airline workers across Europe who are faced with similar threats, even as cabin crew are involved in strikes at British Airways. Of the BA strike there is not a word on Impact’s website. Higgins’ only action, taken in December last year, was to send a letter of support to the BASSA pilot’s organisation’s national office in support of a planned cabin crew strike that the union then called off! It ends with an offer to the union bureaucracy, “If I or the Socialist Party can be of any practical or political assistance during your struggle please don’t hesitate to get in contact.”

A pan-European alliance of airline and transport workers would bring British Airways, Aer Lingus, Sabena et al to their knees. It would provide a powerful example for a unified struggle by the working class across Europe against the devastating attacks on living standards now being prepared in the boardrooms and chancelleries of the European Union and all national governments.



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