

Irish unions seek to end dispute at Aer Lingus

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The trade union bureaucracy is working hand-in-glove with management to bring an end to the dispute developing at Ireland's major airline, Aer Lingus. Cabin crew refused to work new rosters imposed by management on January 17, and one fifth of the workforce, 215, have been suspended from the payroll.

Workers who defied the company were intimidated by threats of being sacked, and were called individually to meetings with management where they were informed of their removal from the payroll. One employee commented, "We have regularly taken pay cuts. We have given enough yet they still want more and the conditions they are imposing on us are totally unreasonable."

The unions have barely lifted a finger to defend their own members. Impact, which represents cabin crew, urged that the dispute be referred to Ireland's Labour Relations Commission (LRC), a body made up of leading functionaries from the state, unions and employers' bodies. The commission has facilitated the implementation of Aer Lingus' €97 million cost-cutting proposals, which saw the firing of all 1,200 ground-staff in Ireland last year. Of these 970 were re-hired on reduced pay, leaving 230 without jobs.

On Thursday, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) united with the leading employers' organisation to invite Aer Lingus for talks to resolve the situation. ICTU General Secretary David Begg declared in a joint statement with IBEC that they had decided to take such action "in view of the serious nature of the dispute."

Despite agreeing to talks, Aer Lingus has remained firm in its determination to break the resistance of the workforce. The airline has hired planes at a cut price

from rival firm, Ryanair, at an estimated cost of €400,000 per day. This has allowed the number of cancellations to be cut from around 30 per day in the first week of the dispute to less than 20. Over 5,000 passengers have been affected by more than 80 cancellations thus far.

The involvement of Ryanair shows that the dispute does not merely concern workers at Aer Lingus. The imposition of the attacks being demanded by management would set an example to be followed not only by other airlines, but by other sectors of the Irish economy where wage cutting and mass layoffs are taking place. This was confirmed when on the eve of the ICTU-brokered talks Aer Lingus saw its stock rise significantly, in a move described by the *Irish Independent* as a sign that the markets "backed Aer Lingus chief executive Christophe Müller."

After talks on Friday, ICTU declared that a resolution was close. In a statement, it held out the hope that both sides would accept the findings of the LRC as final and binding. This is the same role the unions have played at Aer Lingus over an extended period. Since the privatisation of the formerly state-run firm in 2006, workers' conditions have been under sustained attack in an effort to make the airline more competitive.

The latest round of attacks began in late 2009, when the company first outlined its plan to save close to €100 million by means of various cost-cutting measures. These included increasing block hours of flight time from 700 a year to 850, wage reductions and the cutting of staff numbers by over 200.

The union also opposes the elimination of mid-flight lunch breaks on European flights, and the new rules requiring cabin crew to alter their work schedules at three hours notice.

European Union rules limit flying time to less than 900 a year. Cabin crew members' "hours worked" do not include hours spent loading and unloading the plane. Aer Lingus work 18 block hours a week, while crew at its bucket airline competitor, Ryanair, work 19. The rosters mean that, in the most extreme cases, cabin crew now have to work an 11-hour shift with no lunch break.

The action that broke out on January 17 was a response to the imposition of the final component of the 2010 deal, which would have increased flight time from 830 to 850 hours per year.

The ability of the unions to once again divert the determined stand taken by Aer Lingus workers into a dead end is thanks principally to the pseudo-left groups like the Socialist Party (SP) and Socialist Workers Party (SWP), who have come together in the United Left Alliance (ULA) to contest the forthcoming parliamentary elections. Last year, SP and SWP representatives boosted the unions' call for the intervention of the LRC, even as it was clear that this body would merely give a stamp of approval to management demands. Rather than urging workers to break from such organisations, leading SP figure Jo Higgins called on workers to conduct their struggle entirely within the framework of the union apparatus.

In 2011 this right-wing perspective has been maintained. Speaking at the end of the first week of the dispute, SP councillor Claire Dailly, who will be a leading candidate for the ULA, expressed her "full support" for the cabin crew and concluded with the call for "all unions at the company to come together and discuss a collective response."

It took less than a week to demonstrate what this would mean in practice. Under the leadership of ICTU and in collaboration with the employers, a settlement is to be reached through the intervention of the LRC, which will enforce management demands on all essential issues.

For its part, the SWP has published no commentary on the action of the workers since it broke out on January 17.



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