

Unions block fightback at Ireland's Bord Na Mona

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The 1,500 workforce at utility firm Bord Na Mona are in danger of being sold out by the trade union bureaucracy.

Together with management, SIPTU (the Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union), Unite and TEEU (the Technical Engineering and Electrical Union) are collaborating to block any further strike action, after workers walked off the job for three days in June.

The workers, engaged largely in the production of peat briquettes to power gas and electricity supplies at power stations across the country, are seeking a pay increase of 3.5 percent. The increase has been withheld since 2008 and was part of a previous agreement.

Earlier this year, workers voted down a paltry one percent offer from management. The unions then accepted a decision handed down from the Labour Relations Commission (LRC) offering a 1.75 percent pay increase, a one-off payment of €1,000 and a further 1.75 percent potential rise in performance related pay. This would amount to a pay cut, since it does not keep up with inflation rates. The company has also refused to make any pay increases count towards workers' pensions.

The unions had no intention of taking the dispute any further, calling for their members to accept the deal authored by the LRC. But despite the recommendation from SIPTU, Unite and TEEU, workers decisively opposed the offer, voting 57 percent in favour of strike action.

The unions were reluctantly forced to call a one-day stoppage on June 5, and a further two-day strike on June 27-28. Pickets were set up at all Bord Na Mona sites across the country. The stoppage affected production in Laois, Offaly, Westmeath, Kildare, Roscommon and Longford.

Less than a week after the two-day strike on July 2, the unions agreed to a management request to again refer the dispute to the LRC. Bord Na Mona management declared

that "the Company believes that the matter should be referred back to the Labour Court for further investigation and recommendation. As per normal practice we would expect that no further industrial action would take place during the course of such a process."

The unions dutifully complied, confirming that they would be "fully prepared" to call off further two-day strikes scheduled for the last week in July and August. The chair of the three unions involved, Oliver McDonagh, stated, "If the dispute does enter a process that requires no further industrial action then the actions can be suspended until such time as the procedures are complete. It is therefore of the utmost importance that if the company refers the dispute to a third party, they stress the urgency of the matter."

This latter comment sums up the hostility of the trade union bureaucracy to any struggle by the workers. They view strikes as an evil, or at best a useful bargaining chip to secure their position as enforcers of management decisions.

Far from a neutral "third party" as the unions would have their members believe, the LRC is a semi-state body with a long record of enforcing the interests of big business and the corporate elite.

In 2010, the LRC facilitated the sacking of all 1,200 ground staff at Ireland's largest airline, Aer Lingus. The move allowed the company to implement a cost-cutting agenda involving the re-hiring of 970 ground staff on cut-price contracts. In 2011, the LRC played a similar role in enforcing management demands that cabin crew work longer hours.

Last month, the same three unions involved at Bord Na Mona blocked planned strike action by Aer Lingus mechanics at its base in Shannon, arranging a hearing at the LRC on July 18.

Earlier in 2012, the LRC played a critical role in defending Vita Cortex owners, after 32 former employees

had occupied a foam packing plant in Cork. After drawn-out hearings over several months initiated by SIPTU, the LRC offered no support to the workers' claims for previously promised redundancy payments, allowing the trade unions to agree a miserable deal with Vita Cortex owners.

Referring disputes to the LRC has been the default position of the unions in any struggle which has emerged over recent years. This has been part of their broader strategy of collaborating with the Labour-Fine Gael government and big business to impose the burden of the economic crisis onto the backs of working people epitomised by the Croke Park Agreement.

Croke Park has resulted in savings of over €1.5 billion since it was agreed in 2010. The negotiations were chaired by the LRC, ending in a four-year public sector strike ban, a hiring freeze for state employees and pay cuts through the removal of allowances and holiday pay.

Bord Na Mona workers can place no trust whatsoever in the unions if they are to carry their struggle forward. Rank-and-file workers must form their own organisations and reach out to other sections of workers, looking for a way to resist the austerity measures being imposed by the government and the corporate elite.

Such a fight would win broad support under current conditions, with job and pay cuts the norm across Ireland. Unemployment is currently running at close to 15 percent, and the economy is expected to contract this year. Since the Bord Na Mona workers first took strike action, there have been large-scale job cuts announced at Pfizer (177), Irish rail (450-500) and Allied Irish Bank (up to 1,000)—to mention only the most prominent. Uniting these struggles requires the building of a new political party based on the independent interests of the working class—a task which necessitates the turn to a socialist and internationalist perspective.



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