

Unions sabotage Irish bus workers strike

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Up to 1,000 bus workers went on strike across Ireland Sunday. The employees of national bus company Bus Éireann took action against a cost-cutting programme by the firm totalling €5 million (US\$6.5 million).

The strike had a significant impact. According to reports, up to 95 percent of services were affected, including major routes in Dublin and longer inter-city connections. On Monday, an estimated 70,000 passengers were impacted by the work stoppage.

By Monday evening, with the impact of the strike growing and with fears in government that a broader strike movement could develop among the working class, unions and management agreed to a 48-hour “cooling off” period to enter into negotiations.

The move was a desperate attempt by the government to contain the impact of the work stoppage. An *Irish Independent* article noted that the government was fearing a “wave of public sector strikes” and cited an official warning that the bus drivers’ strike could not become a “showpiece dispute.”

The unions involved, the NBRU (National Bus and Rail Union) and SIPTU (Services, Industrial, Technical and Professional Union), were prepared to unconditionally enter talks because they are completely hostile to any defence of the interests of the bus workers.

Following the talks at the Labour Relations Committee (LRC) it was announced that services would resume as normal following unspecified “commitments given”. The company issued a statement that 24 hours’ notice would be given before any resumption of the strike.

The response of the employers’ group, Ibec, to the union’s collusion in ending the strike was to call for the reform of Irish labour law, bringing in provisions guaranteeing the delivery of key services. This is a fairly unambiguous call for the banning of strikes through measures like those presently being imposed

against striking teachers in Greece.

The strike was provoked when Bus Eireann management sought to implement recommendations from the self-same LRC, a state-funded arbitration body with a record of enforcing the demands of the employers. The savings of €5 million would have included pay cuts, reductions in overtime pay and longer working hours.

The state-owned company has been suffering deepening financial problems. Government ministers have sought to blackmail striking workers with the threat that the company could collapse as it was losing €200,000 per day during the strike. Alan Kelly, minister for public and commuter transport, claimed, “This is one of the most serious situations ever facing the public transport system in the history of the state.”

The real source of this crisis is the austerity measures imposed by the Irish ruling elite, which have worsened the chronic underfunding of public services like transportation. Under the pressure of the troika, the Fine Gael-Labour coalition is working systematically to slash state spending and privatise what is left of publicly owned utilities. Plans have already been implemented to sell off the profitable parts of Bord Gais, the state-owned power company, and there is speculation that with the imposition of water charges, similar moves could take place with the water agency.

The assault on the terms and conditions of bus workers is not unique. Since 2008, estimates suggest that Irish workers have seen their earnings fall by 14 percent, and much more is being demanded. The bus strike took place as talks are ongoing across the public sector to agree a follow-up to the Croke Park Agreement, which will contain significant pay cuts, increase working hours and reduce staff numbers.

Discussions at the LRC on the proposed Croke Park II agreement involving the Unite union were ongoing at the time of the shabby climbdown over the bus strike.

It is a foregone conclusion that any deal struck under the auspices of the LRC would impose all of the demands of management at the expense of bus workers and the rest of the working class.

This is the institution that played a leading role in the drafting of the first Croke Park Agreement in 2010, which imposed a four-year strike ban, pay cuts and “voluntary” redundancies that cut the number of workers in the public sector by more than 10 percent. In the private sector, the LRC legitimised the firing of all Aer Lingus ground crew in 2011, many of whom were subsequently rehired on far lower pay.

Bus Eireann spokesman Andrew McLindon confidently stated, “That’s why it’s a very short sharp process of 48 hours where we’ll all sit down and try to get agreement on this so we can bring in the cost saving measures designed to protect the future of the company.”

The only demand made by NBRU leader Jim Faherty before entering discussions on Monday evening was the call for them to be “constructive.”

SIPTU has also worked to isolate the bus workers. The ballot for strike action of its 500 members at Bus Eireann was only to be announced on Thursday, five days after the members of the NBRU initiated strike action. This is in spite of the fact that those bus workers in SIPTU faced the same attacks, which went into force last weekend. In the meantime, SIPTU claimed that its members would not cross pickets during the first days of the strike. In fact, the union simply ensured that the buses that SIPTU members would be working on were parked at locations where there were no pickets of NBRU members.

None of the unions sought to mobilise support more broadly for the strike, in spite of the fact that such a call would be met with widespread enthusiasm under conditions in which similar attacks are being imposed across the economy. SIPTU, which represents more than 60,000 workers, also remains locked in talks with the government to force through a second Croke Park deal against the wishes of public sector workers who have already voted down the first agreement last month.

All indications are that the union bureaucracy is preparing to accept the government’s demands for €1 billion in savings by 2016, albeit in a repackaged deal, which they will seek to sell to their members. The only

viable way for workers to take their struggles forward is through a rebellion against these organisations.



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