

Dublin Bus workers sold out by unions

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For the second time in less than three months, the trade unions have shut down a strike by Irish bus workers against attempts by management to impose a multi-million euro package of savings.

At Dublin Bus, workers went on strike August 4 against management's preparations to implement 11.7 million euros of cost savings. These include attacks on working conditions, as well as pay cuts and changes to drivers' schedules. Drivers will no longer be paid from the time they arrive for a shift at a bus depot, but will be on the clock only at the beginning of their allotted bus route. Holidays are to be reduced, sick days cut, and overtime pay slashed by over 15 percent. Bus workers voted down the proposal, which had been presented by the Labour Relations Court (LRC), and some 3,180 went on strike.

The workers are represented by SIPTU (Services Industrial Professional and Technical Union), and the NBRU (National Bus and Rail Union). On the third day of the strike, both organisations announced an immediate end to the action from the following day and that they would enter talks with management at the same LRC which had drafted the initial multi-million euro savings package.

After 15 hours of talks, which ran until 5am last Thursday, the unions capitulated to management's demands and agreed to ballot members this week on the new terms. Confirming their full support for the company's position, both unions diplomatically stated that they would not be recommending a yes or a no vote, but they would merely point out the "positive" aspects of the deal.

The main concession which they claim to have won is that after 19 months, the pay arrangements will revert back to current practices. According to an Irish Times report, however, such assertions are dishonest. After 19 months, the LRC will be able to consider the question of pay again. Given its record for handing down

decisions in the interests of employers it is not hard to imagine what the outcome of this process would be.

The company has been backed fully in its attacks on the workers by the Labour Party-Fine Gael government, which has made deep cuts to public subsidies for bus services since 2008. This has resulted in the loss of 400 jobs at Dublin bus alone, and the axing of 300 services across the city.

Public transportation is under sustained attack. Earlier this year, a cost-cutting programme was implemented by management at Bus Éireann, which provoked strike action at the nationwide bus company. Similar attacks are being prepared against workers at Irish Rail. Slashing budgets for public transport is part of a strategy to open up the sector to private competition, as shown by government plans to offer sections of Dublin's bus service to private tender.

The current coalition, together with its Fianna Fáil-Green Party predecessor, has implemented spending cuts and tax increases worth more than 20 percent of GDP, collaborating closely with the European Commission, International Monetary Fund, European Central Bank troika under an 85 billion euro bailout programme which has facilitated the recapitalisation of the banks at the expense of working people.

The government knows full well that these measures are producing massive but inchoate opposition and that the bus strike could have been the trigger for this to explode. Transport Minister Leo Varadkaar was quick to warn unions and management not to allow negotiations to last for "weeks," in what was an implicit warning that the government would intervene to impose terms on the workers if an agreement was not reached quickly.

The coalition has already deployed legislation to enforce pay cuts and changes to working conditions across the public sector, under the recently finalised Haddington Road Agreement. Under these new powers,

the government is empowered in any future negotiations to unilaterally force through pay cuts for workers who do not accept new terms and conditions.

All of the unions capitulated without a fight against the legislation, even though in the first round of balloting in April the cuts were overwhelmingly rejected by public sector workers. This is in keeping with the unions role since the beginning of the crisis as a critical mechanism to maintain the control of the ruling class over working people while their living standards are decimated.

The same unions currently involved in the talks at Dublin Bus imposed an identical betrayal at Bus Éireann in May. After the company revealed similar cost-cutting measures which provoked a strike among 1,000 workers, the unions shut it down after three days on the basis of a promise to hold talks at the LRC. Within two weeks an agreement was finalised which stuck to all of the key demands of management and accepted the claim that massive savings had to be made.

Critical to the ability of the unions to force through these betrayals is the role of the pseudo-left, which presents them to working people as genuine organs of struggle. Even as the unions announced they had agreed to talks with management at the LRC, the Socialist Workers Party sought to claim that workers could conduct a successful struggle through these organisations. In a statement published on their web site they wrote that “if the (union) leadership decide to talk, the rank and file must remain strongly organised to keep up the pressure to get what they deserve.

“Rank and file strength depends on cross union meetings of workers in the garages, rank and file newsletters, contact between garages and keeping up the pressure on our own union leaders,” they went on.

The appeal for rank-and-file action is a deliberate attempt to deceive workers and conceal the fact that the SWP’s perspective is to strengthen the control of the leadership of the union bureaucracy over its members. No amount of pressure on the trade unions will alter their role as a police force for the employers and the ruling class as a whole, whose chief task is to prevent any independent movement from emerging in the working class while collaborating with the ruling elite to impose devastating austerity.

Workers at Dublin Bus should vote down the

miserable deal which the unions have agreed to in collusion with management. A successful defence of their pay and working conditions can only go forward through a decisive political break from the trade unions, and the building of independent action committees that will make a determined turn to transport workers and other sections of the working class.



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