

# Irish trade unions agree to government-imposed cuts at Dublin Bus

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Three weeks after drivers at Dublin Bus voted overwhelmingly to reject the latest cost-cutting deal negotiated between the trade unions and management, the unions have accepted a government-led intervention to implement the savings without organising a single protest.

Three days of strike action earlier last month was brought to an abrupt halt by the unions in order to enter talks at the Labour Relations Court (LRC). Bus drivers in the National Bus and Rail Union (NBRU) and Services Industrial Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU) rejected the deal, which would have seen €11.7 million of cuts enforced over the next 18 months.

The intervention by the government is aimed at blackmailing workers with the threat of the shutdown of the company or the forcing through of unprecedented attacks on pay and working conditions.

Transport minister in the Labour-Fine Gael coalition, Leo Varadkar, warned the workers that if they did not comply with this “last ditch” effort to resolve the dispute, the government would move to wind up operations at Dublin bus. “If a strike were to resume, and I very much hope that it doesn’t, the company will be in breach of their contract [with the government] again and realistically there would come a point where the company would not be able to operate any more as it would simply run out of money—there would be no fares coming in, no government subvention coming in,” he declared.

Earlier this month, in a deliberate act of intimidation aimed at any workers planning further strikes, the National Transport Authority (NTA) announced that it was cutting €423,000 from the public subsidy to Dublin Bus for the three days of strike action in August. The state body was set up in 2009 by the previous Fianna Fáil-Green Party government.

On the same day as the subsidy cut was announced, the NTA revealed plans to open up 10 percent of the bus market to private tender for 2016. This would include routes within Dublin, as well as services currently operated nationally by Bus Éireann.

A group led by high-level officials has been established, composed of the government, Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) and the employers’ organisation IBEC, to “investigate” the reasons for the repeated rejection by the drivers of the budget-cutting plan. The group includes leading government civil servants Tom O’Mahony, of the Department of Transport, and John Murphy, of the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation. Chair of ICTU David Begg is also involved as well as chief executive of IBEC Danny McCoy.

As Varadkar’s comments make clear, there will be no alteration to the figure of savings deemed necessary by company management. In a statement, Dublin Bus emphasised that the unions involved were in full support of the cuts. It stated, “The company’s difficult financial situation has been accepted by the Labour Court and by the trade unions’ own independent financial assessors. It was agreed that immediate cost reductions are imperative to protect the future of the company and provide security for employees.”

The financial crisis at Dublin Bus is the result of a deliberate policy by the ruling elite to undermine public transport, as part of its broader strategy of destroying all that remains of public services to pay for the bailout of the financial elite. Subsidies for bus and train services have been repeatedly cut by successive governments, resulting in more than 400 job cuts at Dublin Bus alone since 2008.

Nor are the attacks on workers at Dublin Bus unique. Across the board, the government has led attacks on

wages and working conditions, with the latest agreement reached with the trade unions cutting a further €1 billion from the public-sector pay bill over the next two years, and granting the government unilateral powers to impose further cuts and changes to the terms and conditions of workers' contracts.

The next round of cuts is already under way. Next month, the 2014 budget will be presented, which Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Enda Kenny has described as "tough." Approximately €3 billion in further cuts are expected to be contained in the spending plan, and Kenny has warned that every area of spending is under scrutiny.

The determination of workers at Dublin Bus to defend their livelihoods has been blocked at every point by SIPTU and NBRU. After calling off the strike to agree a concessions deal with management, they ensured that workers from different operational areas of the company voted separately. When the bus drivers overwhelmingly voted down the deal, over a week passed before workers in engineering, clerical, operational, inspector and executive areas voted. Under the pressure of the blackmail tactics of the unions and management, these sections of workers backed the deal.

SIPTU responded by isolating the drivers and attempting to resolve the outstanding issues as quickly as possible. As SIPTU official John Murphy put it at the time, "It is clear from today's result that some progress was made in the recent labour court talks. SIPTU representatives are available to meet with the management of Dublin Bus in the hope of resolving matters still in dispute in the driver grade."

The integration of a privileged layer of the union bureaucracy in to the state is symbolised by the fact that the austerity programme at the company will be imposed by a group led by the head of the trade union bureaucracy, Begg. This is in line with the role played by the unions since the outbreak of the economic crisis in forcing through massive spending cuts in the face of mounting opposition among the population.

No opposition has been forthcoming from the unions on the issue of privatisation. SIPTU and NBRU have gone out of their way to separate the attack on public transport from the current dispute, even though the NTA's announcement coincided with the rejection of the latest deal by the drivers. SIPTU transport organiser Willy Noone remarked that workers had "just

completed an agreement on pay and efficiency measures," and that it was "wholly unacceptable" that 10 percent of routes were to be privatised with government support.

The reality is that the concessions deals negotiated at both Bus Éireann and Dublin Bus were completely acceptable to union bureaucrats in SIPTU, who have worked tirelessly to force them through against widespread resistance by workers.

The pseudo-left Socialist Workers Party and Socialist Party have not issued a single statement on the bus workers dispute since last month, even with the threat of the government to wind up the company having been made and the bringing forward of privatisation plans.

This is in keeping with their defence of the trade union bureaucracy's collaboration in the implementation of austerity measures on working people. The last SWP statement sought to breathe life into the lie that the trade unions will defend workers at the very point where they had called off the drivers' strike and re-entered talks with management on the basis of an acceptance of the need to make cuts.



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