

Irish unions complete sellout of Dublin Bus workers

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The vote last Wednesday by drivers at Dublin Bus organised in SIPTU (Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union) not to take strike action against management cuts was a devastating verdict on the rotten role played by the trade unions.

After Dublin Bus announced a date of November 17 for the implementation of measures designed to save close to €12 million annually, SIPTU balloted its members, who make up around half of all drivers at the company, on industrial action. A majority of 72 percent opposed taking action.

The vote reflects a growing awareness among workers that the union offers no means to combat the attacks of management. It followed the rejection of the latest government-brokered offer by SIPTU members on October 25. The remaining 50 percent of drivers, organised in the NBRU (National Bus and Rail Union) accepted the proposal, which includes pay cuts and changes to working arrangements.

The company vowed to press ahead with the cuts package, claiming that an overall majority of 55 percent of all drivers had accepted the deal. It received the full backing of the government, with Transport Minister Leo Varadkar declaring that the Fine Gael-Labour Party coalition would stand behind the company in the event of further protests by workers.

In line with its role throughout the dispute, SIPTU worked to impose the cuts on its members and block any opposition from the workforce. This was summed up by the decision to hold a new strike ballot following the drivers' opposition to the latest offer, even though the original vote for strike action in August was still valid.

The union justified this by claiming that significant alterations had been made to the cost-cutting plan, and that, in the words of SIPTU President Jack O'Connor,

a further strike ballot would allow the “democratic will” of the workers to be expressed. As SIPTU’s traffic committee put it in a statement announcing the strike ballot, it had been arranged “due to the changed and serious nature of the circumstances that are now in existence.”

With unparalleled cynicism, one of the major factors that SIPTU claimed had changed was the fact that NBRU drivers had backed the deal, which undermined “the requirement for maximum unity” in any work stoppage.

In reality, it is the union bureaucracy which has been working tirelessly to divide the workforce from the moment the three-day strike broke out in August. The work stoppage had a major impact on the transport system in the capital, affecting an estimated 70,000 passengers per day. Most concerning of all for the unions was the fact that the strike won significant sympathy from other sections of workers, who recognised that the Dublin bus staff were facing the same attacks on their pay and working conditions the government has imposed across the entire economy since the onset of the economic crisis in 2008.

Responding to this broad sentiment in support of the workers, Varadkar warned the unions and employers not to allow talks over a deal to drag on due to the threat that a larger social protest movement could develop.

The unions duly obliged, finalising a deal with management which they presented to their members. To foster divisions, the ballots were organised on different days for each section of workers. By the end of August SIPTU and NBRU had managed to compel all workers at Dublin bus to approve the multi-million euro savings programme apart from the drivers.

The unions responded to the ongoing refusal of the

drivers to back the deal by collaborating with the government to force through the measures with the threat of the bankruptcy of the company. A special committee composed of David Begg, head of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU), a representative from the employers' association IBEC and government officials was formed, which appointed two arbitrators to produce a final offer.

The offer that emerged and was voted on late last month kept in place all of the cuts demanded by management and offered nothing to the workers. The commitment to allow the intervention of an arbitrator if the cuts were not reversed after 19 months is not worth the paper it is written on, since such a role would likely be played by the Labour Relations Commission, the very body that helped draft the initial cuts package.

SIPTU's decision to call a new strike ballot had nothing to do with opposition to the cost-cutting package, but was aimed at concluding the union's betrayal of the workers. Under conditions in which NBRU members had been intimidated into backing the deal with the threatened winding up of the company, the SIPTU leadership calculated that drivers in SIPTU were isolated and would not back a strike on their own. Moreover, the repeated attempts by the bureaucracy to shut down the dispute since it broke out meant that none of the workers had any confidence in the ability of the union to organise a genuine struggle in defence of their interests.

Deeper cuts are already being prepared even before the current package has been fully enforced. Accountancy firm Deloitte has been hired to propose how Dublin Bus could be salvaged in the face of its financial problems, which have been exacerbated by the slashing of government funding over the past few years. Among the options being considered is empowering the government to impose cuts unilaterally or placing the firm in receivership, which would allow it to abandon contractual obligations to workers and restructure its operations.

This latter option would act as a further major step in the privatisation of public transport. The National Transport Authority has already tied the cuts at Dublin Bus to the opening up of 10 percent of the market to private providers from 2016. The reorganisation of the firm's operations could prepare the way for a much larger portion of its current operations to be outsourced.

This has been the goal of the government for some time. Since 2008, the subsidies for public bus services have been drastically cut, including support for national bus operator Bus Eireann. This is part of a broader strategy to sharply reduce public services to pay for the multi-billion euro bailout of the financial elite.

NBRU General Secretary Dermot O'Leary claimed that the unions would oppose privatisation, asserting, "The government's responsibility in providing a public bus service for the citizens of the state should not be abdicated at the altar of a policy driven by the desire to place profit ahead of service."

O'Leary's posturing is thoroughly dishonest. It is the role played by the unions in demobilising opposition to the cost-cutting plans that has cleared the way for the assault on and privatisation of bus services.

The only viable basis upon which workers' opposition can be transformed into a movement capable of resisting these attacks is through a political and organisational break with the trade unions. Workers must build their own action committees to assume control of their struggle and appeal to broader layers of the working class for support to defend their jobs and working conditions.



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