

Irish government preparing army to break strike by airport workers

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Following an overwhelming vote by workers at Ireland's three main airports in favour of strike action to defend their pension entitlements, plans have been revealed showing that the government is preparing to use the army as strikebreakers.

According to reports, Ireland's air corps has rented six fire trucks, which have been painted in civilian colours and stored at a military aerodrome near Dublin in preparation for strike action scheduled for March 14. The plan proposes that flights would be diverted to Dublin from Cork and Shannon airports so that services could be kept running. The new fire engines have been rented to prevent any attempt by airport workers to block access to the existing fleet during the strike.

Armed forces personnel are not trained to deal with aircraft emergencies.

Talks broke down between the Dublin Airport Authority (DAA), Aer Lingus and the trade unions. Workers, including ground crew and air traffic controllers, voted to strike over a €780 million deficit in the Irish Airlines Superannuation Scheme (IASS), a joint pension fund provided by Aer Lingus and the airport authorities. To fill the gap, massive cuts of 10-20 percent of pensions for current retirees and those still working, have been proposed.

The employers have indicated they are willing to fund little more than 25 percent of the deficit.

Choreographed outrage against the workers in the press and from government officials centred on the fact that the first date for planned strike action falls on the beginning of the St. Patrick's Day holiday weekend. David Fitzsimons, head of the industry group Retail Excellence Ireland, denounced workers for being irresponsible. "The scheduling of the strike action at the start of St Patrick's weekend will undermine a festival which is worth over €120 million to the local

economy. In 2013, 225,000 passengers used Dublin airport over the St Patrick's Day weekend and the scheduling of this strike on such an important day is in effect holding the country to ransom," he blustered.

The government has made no secret of its hostility to the workers' demands. Transport Minister Leo Varadkar, who has just announced attacks on the salaries of railway workers at state-owned Irish Rail, stated bluntly, "I think the strike should be called off."

The plan to involve the military marks an intensification of the assault on any section of workers seeking to defend their jobs and living conditions. It is in line with similar measures taken across Europe, such as in Greece, where striking workers have been placed under military discipline and forced back to work on several occasions over the past year.

In December, energy workers at the state-owned Energy Supply Board (ESB) came under sustained attack for weeks for their opposition to attempts to make them pay for a €1.7 billion deficit in their pension scheme. The threat of strike action provoked discussions in Ireland's upper house of parliament on the need for anti-strike legislation against workers containing criminal penalties. Such demands will now be revived.

Two months previously, in October, the government imposed an agreement on workers at Dublin Bus who had refused to back a cost-cutting package agreed by management. Arrived at through a government-appointed committee of experts that included trade union officials, it contained all of management's demands in spite of their repeated rejection by the workforce.

Last summer, as part of the Haddington Road Agreement between the unions and government covering the entire public sector, the government was

granted sweeping powers to unilaterally change the pay and working conditions of workers. A public sector strike ban in place since 2010 was extended until 2016.

The increasingly aggressive approach to those workers resisting the devastating attacks has been facilitated by the trade unions, who have sided with the government on every occasion to force through unpopular measures against the opposition of their members. Despite a firm rejection of the first public sector agreement with the government by union members last summer, the unions returned to the negotiating table with the government and accepted all of their demands, including the increased powers for ministers to unilaterally impose cuts to pay and attacks on working conditions.

At ESB, the unions delayed a strike call for a week after an overwhelming vote in favour of industrial action, before entering talks with management and agreeing to a deal which guarantees the energy workers nothing. They made no appeal to other sections of workers to come to the defence of ESB employees in the face of the vicious witch-hunt in the media, and the threat of anti-strike legislation being introduced.

There has been no response from the union leaders to the threat to utilise armed personnel to break the strike. Instead, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) has stepped in to take over negotiations and reach a compromise with management prior to March 14. Talks held so far with the DAA on February 26 and Aer Lingus on February 27 passed without progress. The DAA criticised the unions for having shown “no meaningful engagement” in the process.

The strike sanctioned by the unions is designed to limit the protest as much as possible, while allowing the workforce to let off steam. There will be a four-hour stoppage from 5 a.m. to 9 a.m., with no further dates announced.

The extent of agreement between the union leadership and management was illustrated by SIPTU’s (Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union) pensions spokesman Dermot O’Loughlin, who asked merely that the airport authority increase its proposed €50 million payment to the new defined contributions pension scheme. This was necessary because the figure was based on the financial position of the fund in December 2013, not December 2014 when the deal is now to be implemented. The unions have in effect fully come to

terms with the elimination of the defined benefits scheme currently in existence, which will mean a drastic decline in the value of workers’ pensions.

Past experiences show that the only way to lead a genuine struggle against the pension attacks is through the formation of action committees entirely independent of the union bureaucracy. SIPTU did not lift a finger in January this year when a subsidiary of German airline Lufthansa shut down a jet engine maintenance plant near Dublin with the loss of over 400 highly skilled jobs. They accepted the closure before it was even official, appealing merely for a few additional weeks of redundancy pay for each year served by the workforce.

At Aer Lingus, which has been implementing a programme of budget cuts since 2009, the unions have collaborated with management throughout. Early in 2010, all 1,200 cabin crew were removed from the payroll before 970 were reinstated on reduced wages. (See: “Ireland: Trade unions paved way for mass sackings at Aer Lingus”)

In 2011, both cabin crew and pilots sought to oppose increases to working hours by voting for strikes, but each time the unions stepped in to refer the dispute to the Labour Relations Commission, before agreeing to deals which contained all of the company’s demands.



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