

Irish high court outlaws strike by airport workers

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In a major intensification of the assault on working people, Ireland's High Court issued a judgement last Wednesday banning a four-hour strike scheduled at Dublin, Cork and Shannon Airports on March 14.

The strikes were called by the Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU) to protest a shortfall in the pension scheme for airport workers of €780 million.

The airport authority and national airline Aer Lingus are proposing to close the gap by imposing cuts of up to 20 percent on the pensions of current and future retirees, and by changing the terms of the scheme from a defined benefits to a defined contributions pension. A ruling by the Labour Court last year proposed that the companies meet only 25 percent of the shortfall, leaving the vast majority to be extracted through lower pensions and increased contributions by employees.

The application to the court came from the Dublin Airport Authority (DAA) and budget airline Ryanair. The companies alleged that the strike was unlawful, as it could not be considered a "valid trade dispute" under the Industrial Relations Act, 1990.

This legal fig leaf was part of a campaign by the government over recent weeks to demonise the airport workers for daring to resist the attacks on their working conditions. It included a secret government plan to use the army to break the strike if it went ahead, with reports that the armed forces were storing a fleet of fire engines at an aerodrome near Dublin to cross picket lines.

The court ruling is in keeping with attempts to criminalise all opposition to policies of social devastation to pay for the bailout of the financial elite. The outlawing of the airport strike comes in the wake of discussions in the Irish parliament about the possibility of drafting anti-strike legislation to cover

essential services, which would impose fines and prison terms on any workers who take industrial action.

The government sought to stand reality on its head by blaming airport workers for threatening the national economy by striking on the St. Patrick's holiday weekend. According to officials, the four-hour strike would put hundreds of millions of euros in profits for local businesses at risk and damage Ireland's international reputation.

Transport Minister Leo Varadkar made an effort to portray himself as a defender of ordinary people against the "selfish" airport workers, declaring that they were wrong to take strike action. In a public statement, he admonished, "My message is to ask them to think again to reconsider whether they want to go ahead with this strike targeting tourists and Irish citizens over St. Patrick's day."

The real source of the economic crisis, which threatens thousands with unemployment and poverty, is the austerity policies of the Fine Gael-Labour government, which has slashed budgets since coming to power in 2011. Recent months have witnessed an intensification of this course, with the agreement of a new public sector pay deal last summer cutting a further €1 billion from the pay bill by 2016. More recently, the government presented plans to privatise public services like bus companies and attack working conditions at the state rail firm.

Despite government attempts to portray its formal exit from its bailout programme in December as a great success, Dublin remains firmly under the dictates of the European Union (EU). Media reports last week confirmed that EU officials will visit Ireland next month for their first post-bailout monitoring mission. There are to be two such missions each year, until 75 percent of the bailout has been repaid. Given that the

last of the bailout loans are scheduled to be paid back in 2042, this effectively means the continuation of austerity policies for decades to come.

These policies can only be carried through by using the full force of the state against working class opposition. The use of the courts to ban the airport workers' strike is a warning of how other sections of workers will be dealt with, such as the more than 20,000 teachers currently voting on strike action over changes to the education system, which they have been protesting for months.

The trade unions voiced no opposition the court ruling, which denied the workers their basic right to strike. Instead, SIPTU maintained its full commitment to the negotiating process with DAA and Aer Lingus management, through a government-imposed "expert panel."

The panel, established by the Department of Transport, Sport and Tourism and the Department of Jobs, Business and Enterprise, includes representatives from the employers' organisation Ibec and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU). They are to be advised by financial consultants from accountants KPMG and Mazars.

Union representatives signed a joint statement that accepted all of the government's arguments, declaring, "The Government, Ibec and Congress are of the view that a final effort should be made to resolve this dispute without recourse to industrial action, which would be very disruptive for the travelling public and could have very serious consequences for the companies concerned, their employees, members of the Irish Airlines Superannuation Scheme (IASS) and for the economy."

The four-hour strike, which was outlawed by the ban, was only a token measure designed to maintain the bureaucracy's control over growing anger among the workforce while they sought to reach a sellout deal with management.

This was the unions' role in a similar dispute at the Energy Supply Board (ESB) in December. Giving over two weeks' notice of a strike by energy workers in protest at a €1.5 billion shortfall in their pension fund, they caved in to a deal with management that guaranteed the workers nothing and called off the strike. They made no appeal for broader support in the population against the attacks on ESB workers in the

media and from the political establishment, even though all workers face similar threats.

The unions have allowed management to take the offensive. Aer Lingus arrogantly announced its intent to sue SIPTU for losses resulting from the proposed strike, claiming that it should be held liable for the drop in passenger numbers and additional costs of changing flight schedules in anticipation of industrial action.

The pseudo-left groups have not said a word on the court injunction. They are thoroughly complicit in the attacks on workers and the increasing resort to state powers to block working class resistance.

Their readiness to accede to the use of state repression against workers was illustrated when the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) provided a platform for David Norris at its annual Marxism event. Norris backed a draft bill in the senate, the upper house of parliament, which proposed the institution of legal restrictions on the right to strike, to be enforced with the threat of huge fines and prison terms. To date, the SWP has yet to give an explanation for this, and there has been no sign of any opposition from within the party to the promotion of right-wing, anti-working class figures like Norris.



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