Hundreds demonstrate in Dublin in support of locked-out waste collection workers

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Some 500 people marched through central Dublin last week to protest attempts by Greyhound Recycling to cut the wages of waste collection workers by over 35 percent, which it is seeking to enforce by means of a lockout in place since June 17.

After a ruling by the state-backed Labour Relations Commission (LRC) at the end of May declaring Greyhound's business model to be unsustainable and the workers' wages not to be in line with the industry, the firm gave 78 workers an ultimatum to accept up to 35 percent in pay cuts. When they refused, security guards were posted at the company's facilities and workers were denied entry until they accept the new terms and conditions.

Reports suggest that the company deliberately set out to provoke a confrontation. The *Irish Times* noted that scab workers from the state-run Intreo employment agency were conveniently "nearby" on the day that workers were given the ultimatum, and they have been employed by Greyhound ever since on the reduced pay levels. On the same day as the protest, Greyhound chief executive Michael Buckley provocatively declared that they were providing a better service than the locked out workers.

The company sought and obtained temporary injunctions against the locked out workers on June 17. These were later lifted and employees officially began a strike against the proposals on June 27.

On July 3, a member of the Impact trade union was hit by an unidentified white van while picketing outside Greyhound's facilities. He was taken to hospital but had no serious injuries. Greyhound sought to deny any association with the incident, stating that the van did not belong to them and that it had been driven by a "visitor" to their site.

Greyhound has the full backing of the local authority and government in its conflict with the workers. It was handed the contract to collect Dublin's waste from 140,000 domestic properties in 2012 when the city's collection service was privatised. The privatisation was part of the city's 2012 budget, which was approved by Labour Party councillors, and the process was concluded by the city manager.

The privatisation has been a disaster for the working population. Annual waste charges were increased, and a waiver scheme designed to support low-income families was blocked to new applicants. Within a year, the 40,000 waivers for poor families under the previous public service were scrapped.

At the same time, the involvement of private companies seeking ever-greater profits has led to repeated safety breaches. In February, Dublin City Council was compelled to vote to take formal regulatory control for waste management back under their control after a fire broke out at a waste plant operated by Oxigen that could not be put out for five days. Large plumes of toxic smoke escaped into the local area.

The council's decision to grant the contract for waste collection to Greyhound was itself highly questionable. On three occasions last year, the company was found to be illegally storing waste on farms in the Dublin area. It was prosecuted and convicted of having kept containers of illegal waste for shipping to China, Indonesia and India at Dublin docks. And last December, the company's two directors, the brothers Michael and Brian Buckley, were found guilty of failing to prevent the escape of harmful odours and emissions from the plant in Clondalkin, Dublin. The court agreed not to convict the pair after it emerged that a criminal record would adversely impact the company's commercial operations in the US.

The privatisation of waste management was an integral part of the government's multi-billion euro programme of cost cutting to pay for the bailout of the banks. Dublin was the last local authority to privatise its waste management services, and substantial cuts were imposed in healthcare, education and social welfare budgets. On top of the increased waste charges, a property tax and water charges have been introduced, while average wages in some areas have fallen by double-digit figures since 2008.

Jesse Hughes, the spokesperson for the locked out workers, summed up the desperation of their plight, saying, "These workers wouldn't be able to afford their mortgages under the proposed cuts. Most of us have families to feed."

The company's call for the workers to return to their jobs and allow the LRC to conduct "arbitration" is a cynical ruse that should deceive no one. Time and again, the LRC has acted as the enforcer for the employers' demands over recent years, imposing wage cuts and changes in terms and conditions for private and public sector workers alike.

The LRC was central to the drafting of the Croke Park agreement in 2010, which imposed a strike ban and billions of euros of cuts on the public sector. When it became clear last year that these savings did not go far enough, the Haddington Road deal was sealed, including a further €1 billion in cuts to the public sector pay bill by the end of next year.

This has created the conditions for the employers to go on the offensive. Last December, facing the prospect of a strike by state electricity workers, discussions began within ruling circles over a law to ban strikes in "emergency" sectors. Three months later, amid a media witch-hunt warning of the danger posed to the national economy, the high court ruled to ban a four hour strike by airport workers in Dublin and Cork. In the days prior to the ruling, secret plans were leaked showing that the government was readying the army to intervene if the strike went ahead.

Now, the LRC's ruling in relation to Greyhound effectively gave a green light to the company to proceed with its aggressive attacks on the workforce.

As well as permitting the use of the state employment agency by Greyhound, the government has contacted the LRC to advise of its support for arbitration. Economy minister Richard Bruton announced a review in the waste management sector.

The trade unions were fully involved in the negotiations over Croke Park and Haddington Road, forcing through both agreements against widespread opposition from their own members.

Both Impact and the Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU) participated in the privatisation of waste collection and thus bear responsibility for the subsequent attacks including the latest pay offer.

In October 2011, Impact presented a report on privatisation to Dublin City Council in which it sought to convince the council that privatisation was not necessary, but could ultimately be accepted. Inadvertently providing a devastating indictment of their own role in preparing the ground for the sell-off, Impact wrote, "Over more than a decade, cleansing staff have agreed to a series of service reorganisations and productivity-improvement changes that have massively reduced costs while improving the waste collection service."

Impact also pointed out that it was "willing to find savings to ensure that the Dublin City Council retains its waste collection service." But if this was unsuccessful, it politely requested that the council at least delay its decision on privatisation until the government had finalised plans for regulating private providers.

In the face of the current attacks, SIPTU spokesman Henry O'Shea's main complaint was that no agreement had been made with the union on the pay changes. He added that the LRC recommendation had not specified that cuts to pay had to be as large as 35 percent, and called upon the union and employer to come together and agree on savings measures that avoided pay cuts.