

Irish bus workers strike for 48 hours

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A two day nationwide strike by Irish bus workers took place on May 1 and 2 in a move to stop government proposals for the privatisation of bus services.

The unions involved, the NBRU (National Bus and Rail Union) and SIPTU (Services, Industrial, Technical and Professional Union) plan to hold another five days of work stoppages over the month of May.

According to the *Irish Examiner* up to one million passengers were impacted by the strike, and it is estimated that the Irish bus companies Dublin Bus and Bus Eireann could lose almost €11 million if further planned strikes go ahead. Dublin Bus lost €1.2 million from the two day stoppages.

On May 1, hundreds of bus workers marched in Dublin and Cork to voice their anger at continuing pay cuts and longer working hours bus they endured over the past years.

The latest two-day strike was a response to the Fine Gael/Labour government's plans to privatise 10 percent of bus services. The National Transport Authority (NTA) are planning that all bus services in Waterford city, some in Cork and the south east region, as well as a certain portion of Dublin commuter routes be put out to tender for operation by private companies in 2016. The government has been working systematically to slash state spending and privatise what is left of publicly-owned utilities. The plans to privatise one in ten services is a first step to complete privatisation.

These attacks are part of a general assault on the pay and conditions of Irish workers. Since 2008, estimates suggest that workers have seen their earnings fall by 14 percent. Austerity measures and sweeping cuts imposed by the ruling elite since the banking crash of 2008 have worsened the chronic underfunding of public services like transportation.

The ongoing undermining of the pay and conditions of bus workers would not have been possible without

the collaboration of the trade unions. They have directed all disputes into discussions at the Labour Relations Commission (LRC) which is the main state body that sets the agenda for employers' proposals to undermine pay and conditions. The unions have cooperated with the big lie that the LCR is neutral in its handling of industrial conflicts brought before it.

The reality is very different. The LCR played a leading role in the drafting of the first Croke Park Agreement in 2010, which imposed a four-year strike ban, pay cuts and “voluntary” redundancies that cut the number of workers in the public sector by more than 10 percent. The government, with the collaboration of the unions, was able to impose €1 billion in cuts. Two years ago the LCR drafted pay cuts worth €5 million on behalf of Bus Eireann. A further €11 million worth of cuts came into force at the end of 2013. Bus route tendering and privatisation are expected in coming years to undermine conditions and job security and introduce lower pay and worsened conditions.

The bus companies responded to the strike by initiating legal proceedings against the unions for loss of revenue incurred. There were statements by right-wing commentators declaring the strike should be made illegal as it was a political, not an industrial dispute.

In response NBRU General Secretary Dermot O’Leary called on the Minister for Transport Paschal Donohoe to intervene. There was no attempt by the unions to involve other transport workers, such as commuter train drivers on the DART service or the Luas inter-city services.

It is also becoming clear that although the unions have stated they are opposed to privatisation, they are seeking a way to negotiate a deal with the NTA which would begin a sell-off.

A letter by O’Leary to the Minister for Transport, the NTA and the bus companies at the start of the 48 hour stoppage stated that while the NBRU opposed

privatisation, negotiations should recommence “in an effort to resolve all of the concerns of all of the parties.”

The union accepts the agenda for negotiations, with one provision pointing to, “The NTA's role in ensuring commitments on terms and conditions are honoured by new providers.”

Also on the agenda is the “Timeframe, Phasing of 10%, growth.”

It is evident that the next move by the Irish ruling elite through its government agencies is to make it illegal for workers to strike in a large number of public services, including transport. The strike was forcefully condemned by the main national newspapers, as well as employer's organisations. Mark Fielding, chief executive of the Irish Small Business Association, called on the government to introduce legislation to ban strikes in essential services. The main employers' group, Ibec, has also called for “reform” of Irish labour law which would ban strikes in areas such as electric supply, health and transport.

If drivers are to successfully oppose such moves, they cannot rely on the unions. Time and again the unions have intervened to sabotage the militant struggles of bus drivers, helping to impose massive concessions. Workers must break with these organisations through the formation of action committees to take up an independent struggle against wage cuts and worsening conditions.



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