

Dublin, Ireland bus workers start series of strikes

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Dublin bus workers began the first in a series of two-day stoppages on September 8, seeking pay parity with drivers on the Dublin light rail system (Luas).

The Luas drivers secured a pay rise of 18 percent over four years after a long running series of strikes last June. The workers at Dublin Bus are seeking a 15 percent increase, a demand that was rejected by the Labour Court—the second and final state arbitration body dealing with industrial disputes. Up to 98 percent of bus workers voted for industrial action.

The Labour Court six weeks ago offered a general 8.25 percent pay increase (2.75 percent per year) for all 3,364 Dublin Bus workers.

As a result of the strike over 400,000 people were forced to find alternative travel arrangements while Dublin was log jammed during the rush hour, causing traffic chaos. The main unions involved—SIPTU (Services Industrial Professional and Technical Union) and NBRU (National Bus and Rail Union)—plan two further 48-hour stoppages over the coming weeks. Shane Ross, the current minister for transport, has stated he will not interfere in the dispute. Government funding to Dublin Bus has been reduced by 32 percent since 2008.

The source of the dispute is the continuing attack by Dublin Bus management and the State Transport Authority on the pay and general conditions of bus workers. The slashing of pay and conditions has continued unabated since 2008. Chronic underfunding of public services like transportation, coupled with pay freezes in the public sector has meant that bus workers have not received a pay increase in eight years. This has led to bitter resentment from many who have experienced the collaboration of the unions and the Fine Gael government through the Labour Court in holding down wages and eroding conditions of

employment.

The unions have been working through bodies such as the Labour Court and the recently formed Workplace Relations Commission (WRC), which are state-funded arbitration bodies with a record of enforcing the demands of the employers. These institutions under different names played a leading role in the drafting of the first Croke Park Agreement in 2010 between the government and the unions, which imposed a four-year strike ban, pay cuts and “voluntary” redundancies that slashed the number of workers in the public sector by more than 10 percent. In the private sector, the Labour Relations Committee (LRC), forerunner of the WRC, legitimised the firing of all Aer Lingus ground crew in 2011, many of whom were subsequently rehired at far lower pay.

In 2013, although the workers at Dublin Bus voted by 72 percent to reject an €11.7 million cost saving plan, the unions through the Labour Court, after some small adjustments, sold the package to the membership. Dublin Bus boasted that cost-cutting programmes negotiated with the unions had led to a 16 percent reduction in the workforce and a pay freeze since 2008. There was also a cut in overtime payments and all day shifts were extended from twelve to thirteen hours.

In 2015, SIPTU formally declared that it was opposed to the National Transport Authority (NTA) plan to privatise 10 percent of Dublin Bus and Bus Eireann routes. Again the workers by a large majority opposed the plan. Using the same method of fixing a deal in the Labour Relations Commission (now Workplace Relations Commission) unions called off a series of two-day strikes, and agreed to the decimation of bus services under the pretext that, “No employee of the company will be compulsorily required to transfer to a private contractor.” NBRU General Secretary Dermot

O'Leary said the LRC had successfully brought the parties to a point where the unions felt able to call off their planned industrial actions.

The unions negotiated a six percent pay rise in 2008 as part of a deal called "Towards 2016". This was deferred by the unions in 2009 under a "cost-cutting programme" and the workers never received the pay rise. Dublin Bus instead made 290 drivers redundant and cut 120 buses from the fleet (about 10 percent).

If workers at Dublin Bus are to successfully challenge the erosion of their living standards and planned privatisation of the service, they must form new organisations independent from the unions and their collaboration with state-sponsored "arbitration" bodies. These act as a tool for the implementation of the programme of the ruling elite and Fine Gael government. Just how neutral these bodies actually are can be judged by the remarks of Kieran Mulvey, who recently retired with a €300,000 lump sum as head of the LRC (now WRC).

Mulvey, who has always served as a right wing apologist in the Irish media for austerity and cuts to public spending, went on record in 2012 in support of the Croke Park Agreement. In reference to the Luas tram workers strike just three months ago, he declared on radio, "It doesn't behove trade unions to be involved in a national dispute on our public holiday... I'm not enamoured at the idea of a gun being put to our head... particularly around St Patrick's Day."

Since 2008 estimates suggest Irish workers have seen their earnings plummet by 14 percent. The unions, as in the rest of Europe, have played the key role in facilitating the driving down of living standards, thus emboldening the ruling elites to constantly come back for more.



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