

Irish unions call off Dublin bus strike

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A series of two-day strikes by Dublin bus workers has been called off by the trade unions.

The 3,400 workers at Dublin Bus have already held six days of strikes over the month of September. The two main unions involved, SIPTU (Services Industrial Professional and Technical Union) and NBRU (National Bus and Rail Union), entered four days of talks on September 26 with representatives of the Works Relation Commission (WRC)—the state sponsored arbitration body which recently rejected a 15 percent pay claim by the bus workers.

The unions have said that unless Dublin Bus was willing to offer more than a 8.5 percent pay increase, the 24-hour stoppage planned for Saturday October 1 would go ahead.

Both SIPTU and the NBRU had been pushing for the intervention of Irish Transport Minister Shane Ross to revive talks within the WRC. Ross has made it clear that he will not intervene and said he would “not ride in on a white horse in shining armour with a chequebook to solve the dispute.”

Successive governments have cut the state subvention to Dublin Bus by €28 million, with routes to predominately working class estates heavily reduced.

The six days of strikes to date have cost the company €6 million.

When the strikes started at the beginning of September, there was an outcry in the media and business circles, even though the bus workers have not had a pay rise since 2008. The CEO of the Irish Small and Medium Enterprises Association, Mark Fleming, insisted business was losing € 2.5 million per strike day, and urged Ross to intervene saying, “If he won’t do it, then I’d at least like to try.”

He added a few tips for Ross on how best to deal with the bus workers’ strikes, saying, “I would have thought that some kind of back channel would be going on by now. And I am surprised that there isn’t. It’s very

weird.”

Michael O’Leary, CEO of Ryanair who acts as a crusader for the right-wing and the wealthy elite, has urged the government to privatise all bus and rail services and insisted, “The company should have had a back-up plan such as using private coach operators on strike days.”

Earlier this year O’Leary described striking tram drivers as “lunatics” and “headbangers.” Regarding the tram workers dispute, he said, “It takes about five minutes to train a Luas driver. There’s a button, you go left. A button, you go right, and that’s all it takes to drive a Luas train.”

The function of the trade unions’ latest move is to wind down the dispute and prepare the way for the defeat of their members’ struggle. At Dublin Bus, it was the selling of past deals to union members through such state arbitration bodies as the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) and the Labour Court which strengthened the hands of the employers. Now the union leaders have been falling over themselves trying to prove their “moderation,” “reasonableness” and willingness to do a deal.

SIPTU spokesman Owen Reidy declared last week, “The minister has to be involved. Standing on the sideline, holding his nose, looking the other way and not being prepared to try to create an environment for conflict resolution is a dereliction of duty.”

In a rebuke to the Small Business Association for criticising the strike, NBRU General Secretary Dermot O’Leary pointed to his faith in the WRC, saying, “The NBRU will always rely on the WRC to resolve this. However, to get there Dublin Bus needs to drop its preconditions.”

These “preconditions” centre on the need of Dublin Bus management to extract extra productivity from the bus drivers, which, looking at the deals the unions have done in the past, will involve cutting routes and

reducing staff.

Thanks to the previous sell-outs by the unions, the company has gone from 171 routes to 110 in the past decade, carrying four percent more passengers with 20 percent fewer buses. The workforce has been reduced by 17 percent in eight years.

The unions, through the WRC, have already agreed to plans to privatise 10 percent of the service and a pay freeze has been in force since 2008. Overtime payments were cut and all day shifts were extended from 12 to 13 hours.



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