

Irish unions scuttle Bus Eireann strike

Dermot Quinn
19 April 2017

The strike by 2,600 bus workers at Ireland's Bus Eireann transport company has been called off.

The two main unions involved, the National Bus and Rail Union (NBRU) and the Services Industrial Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU), accepted the recommendation of the Labour Court, the final state arbitration body, and called off the strike on April 13.

The unions have agreed to ballot their members on an agreement that means at least €18 million in cuts to wages and services.

At the end of February, Bus Eireann bosses unilaterally introduced a list of 55 cost-cutting measures to reduce wages and conditions, claiming it had lost €6 million in 2016 and was facing insolvency. The Fine Gael government has been introducing measures over several years to outsource services and privatise certain routes.

A threatened strike at the beginning of March was called off by the unions to facilitate talks at the Works Relations Commission (WRC), the state-funded arbitration body with a record of sanctioning the demands of the employers—albeit with modifications. The unions work with the Labour Court in much the same way.

As a result, transport workers have experienced a steady decline in wages and conditions over the years, as the trade unions have been transformed into organisations hostile to their interests. Totally incorporated into the state, the union bureaucrats are now despised by thousands of workers within their own organisations and considered an irrelevancy by the majority of workers and youth who are outside these organisations.

After the weeks of talks at the WRC broke down, the recommendations from the Labour Court are to be put to a ballot of bus workers over the next three weeks. The document includes provisions for 220 redundancies of which 120 will be drivers and 46 clerical workers, as well as the ending of many routes across the country. Cuts to wages include the abolition of bonuses for shift work, a ban on overtime, and a compulsory two-hour-and-45-minute daily unpaid break. There will also be measures introduced to insure the remaining drivers have

less control over the routes and the hours they work.

The cuts to services and job cuts negotiated with the unions also include the closure of the Dundalk maintenance garage. The *Irish News* noted in its editorial after the strike was called off, “A large amount of what the company called for was in the Labour Court’s recommendations, which could point towards Bus Eireann agreeing to the terms.”

There is growing anger among bus workers across the transport industry. The government-sponsored slide towards privatising bus routes and cutting wages and conditions has been met with resistance. However, this has constantly been channelled by the unions into state “arbitration” bodies, where aggressive cuts to workers pay and conditions are hammered out.

At the end of March, the anger and frustration of bus workers came to the fore when hundreds attempted to spread the strike by picketing city bus depots and trains. The NBRU quickly moved to shut down the “secondary picketing,” and Patricia King, general secretary of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, immediately issued a statement condemning the bus workers actions, as did Shane Ross, the minister for transport.

NBRU General Secretary Dermot O’Leary promptly apologised on national radio for his “members’ behaviour,” stating arrogantly, “I’m urging those who are picketing to stop, and people should go to work immediately. I categorically state that the general secretary, who is me, is very much in charge of my trade union and its destination in this dispute.”

The NBRU and SIPTU officials then spent a frantic four hours during the morning Dublin rush hour trying to stop Bus Eireann workers from picketing and spreading the strike. On April 9, as the strike continued and it was widely reported that the unions were prepared to agree to €18 million in cuts, O’Leary remarked, “The issue of headcount reduction would not be unusual when talking about efficiencies.”

Having given assurances that the strike would not spread, O’Leary again reiterated that the dispute could

only be solved by what he called “the proper arbitration bodies.”

Chairman Kevin Foley, who presides over the Labour Court, is one of a layer of civil servants who receive between €175,000 and €180,000 annually to concoct agreements with the union leaders. Workers’ ballots are usually delayed for weeks to insure the maximum demoralisation.

The compliance of workers locked within these organisations—which serve a policing function for attacks on workers pay and conditions—would not last if it were not for the political support the union bureaucracy receives from all the establishment parties.

Fine Fail and Sinn Fein condemned the Fine Gael government for grooming the company for privatisation, and called for the minister of transport to intervene. The pseudo-left members of the Dail/parliament (TDs) were vocal in their support for the striking bus workers.

At a parliamentary debate on the strike, Paul Murphy of the Socialist Party/Solidarity group declared, “I salute the actions of the Bus Eireann workers. They are fighting not only in defence of their own terms and conditions, but for all those who work in public transport.”

Their real and unswerving support, however, is for the trade union bureaucracy. While a number of bus workers looked on from the gallery, Murphy’s colleague, Ruth Coppinger, opened her speech by saying, “It is welcome that talks have been announced in the Workplace Relations Commission tomorrow.”

Only a united struggle by workers independent of the moribund union structures will succeed in challenging the continuing attacks on jobs, living standards and essential services.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact