

Dublin Bus workers in Ireland overwhelmingly reject union-backed deal

Dermot Quinn
1 September 2021

An overwhelming majority of the 1,700 workers at Dublin Bus have voted down a union-backed proposal by the company to worsen the working conditions of bus drivers.

The “Transformational Agreement” would have enforced gruelling changes in work practices in exchange for increases in pay of up to 15 percent spread over six years. Workers rebelled against the Service Industrial Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU) and the National Bus and Rail Union (NBRU), both of which recommended the deal.

The overwhelming rejection of the agreement on August 12 by 97 percent of the membership shows that bus workers recognised the agreement as a fraud. Under the plan, drivers feared they would be compelled to spend more time behind the wheel, with longer working days spread over 10 hours, in return for long-overdue pay increases. The plan also proposed workers drive multiple routes from any one garage instead of, as now, being “marked in” for one or two routes. An increase in Sunday working and reduced summer breaks were also mooted.

Speaking after the vote, NBRU general secretary Dermot O’Leary cynically acknowledged, “I have been criticised by my own members for not attacking [the proposals] and to be fair to our own members and members of SIPTU, we were criticised for even producing the document.”

He explained that “Dublin Bus came to us last year and basically said to us that, in order for them to compete with what we call low-wage operators, they had to become more efficient.

“They gave us a set of proposals that we did say to them during the discussions would be extremely difficult, if not nigh on impossible for drivers to accept...

“It put them in an invidious position where they [the drivers] were asked to accept something that we did say to the company at the time that they would struggle with.”

O’Leary manages to exclude from his account the fact that the unions then recommended their members accept the deal! The NBRU’s warning that it would be “nigh on impossible” to force these proposals on workers was not a threat, but a piece of friendly advice. Both the unions and Dublin Bus are working together to ensure the company’s “competitiveness”.

This is corporate shorthand for continued privatisations and attacks on workers’ conditions. Dublin Bus is being lined up to compete with private companies before its contract with the government’s National Transport Authority (NTA) expires in 2024, when additional routes will be put out to tender for private operators. The NTA has developed a “BusConnects” plan designed to “streamline” and “modernise” public transport in the capital at the cost of workers’ pay and conditions, in line with the practice of transport operators worldwide.

To date, the unions have colluded in the privatisation of 10 percent of Dublin Bus routes, while successive governments have cut the state subvention to Dublin Bus by €28 million. In April 2017, the unions scuttled a strike by 2,600 bus workers at Ireland’s Bus Eireann transport company and agreed to ballot their members on an agreement of over €18 million in cuts to wages and services.

In the last decade, Dublin Bus company has reduced its number of buses by 20 per cent and the workforce by 17 percent. It has also cut over 60 routes.

SIPTU and the NBRU are already putting pressure on their members to submit to the company’s agenda, using the threat of job losses if the deal is not accepted. The unions issued a joint statement warning: “It is true that no union can give guarantees around winning future tenders for current and/or new Dublin routes. We can say, however, that Dublin Bus’s chances of winning future tendering competitions will be severely diminished, if not holed below the waterline, if it remains as it currently

operates. That is not scaremongering, that is just trying to spell it out.”

This is presented to workers as an ultimatum, making clear the unions will do nothing to oppose the company’s attacks if their members continue to fight for their interests. Attempts are already being made to subvert last month’s vote, with the *Irish Times* reporting that, following rejection of the deal, the unions and management will seek to use the next pay round to smuggle through some of rejected concessions. A pay agreement has been under negotiation since 2019.

As the union bureaucracy becomes ever more exposed as a corporatist partner of management, its leaders increasingly depend on pseudo-left groups to cover for their betrayals and channel workers’ protests and concerns behind pointless moral appeals to the Fianna Fáil/Fine Gael/Green Party coalition government for a change in policy.

In late July, Richard Boyd Barrett, TD (Member of Parliament) for the People Before Profit party, told a 100-strong protest of bus drivers outside the Dáil (parliament) that he would write to the Minister for Transport, the NTA, the Taoiseach (prime minister) and the Tánaiste (deputy prime minister) outlining drivers’ concerns. Boyd Barrett made not a word of criticism of the trade unions’ role in promoting the company’s proposals.

People Before Profit was established in 2005 by the British Socialist Workers Party, leading apologists and functionaries for the trade union bureaucracy in the UK.

After drivers emphatically rejected the Dublin Bus deal, Boyd Barrett continued his cover-up on behalf of the unions. On August 20, he joined a much-diminished protest of 20 workers to hand in a letter to the Minister for Transport, Eamon Ryan. Boyd Barrett complained that the government had “failed to consult” bus drivers over the new proposals and “totally let them down”. His actions sow illusions that the government, which backs Dublin Bus to the hilt, can be convinced to intervene in defence of workers and distract from the fact that the unions are close partners of both in the drive to “streamline” the transport system.

The Dublin Bus drivers’ vote took place one month after SIPTU shut down a planned strike at Doyle Shipping Group (DSG) in Dublin Port. DSG, one of Ireland’s largest independent shipping and warehouse companies, loads and unloads cargo vessels and provides storage, dry docking and ship repair at all of Ireland’s ports. Workers had voted by a large majority to begin rolling 72-hour

work stoppages in pursuit of improved pay and conditions and over health and safety concerns.

In 2020, DSG pleaded guilty to breaches of the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act following the death of a worker and father of two, James Byrne in 2018. Byrne was killed during the unsafe dismantling of a steel hopper at Ocean Pier in Dublin Port. The company admitted failing to identify hazards or carry out risk assessments and was fined €850,000.

These experiences of Dublin bus and dock workers are shared by their class brothers and sisters internationally. In Manchester this year, the Unite union carried out a rotten betrayal of Go North West bus workers who spent 11 weeks out on strike, pushing through over a million pounds-worth of concessions in attacks on working conditions and redundancies. In London, Unite has sold out struggles against Remote Sign On and over pay. Working with First Group, the union has facilitated attacks on bus drivers’ terms and conditions all over the country. Throughout the pandemic, all drivers have been dangerously exposed to the dangers of Covid-19 with the unions’ consent, with many tragically losing their lives.

In response to Unite’s criminal complicity with the bus operators and Transport for London during the pandemic, drivers in London established a rank-and-file committee independent of the unions. It has fought to oppose the employers’ and Unite’s endangering of drivers’ safety, their efforts to offload the costs of the pandemic onto workers and to use the crisis to push through massive restructuring programmes.

We call on Dublin Bus drivers to contact the committee today and begin a discussion on the way forward in their struggle.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact