

# Irish bus workers defy unions and continue strike

By Dermot Quinn  
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Over 2,600 workers in the Republic of Ireland have been on strike at Bus Eireann—the national inter-county public transport company—for almost two weeks in a bitter dispute over the company’s unilateral implementation of cuts to wages and changes to work practices.

Over 100,000 people use the Bus Eireann service nationally.

All of the company’s routes throughout the country have been impacted, with school bus drivers likely to join the strike pending a ballot by the Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU)—one of the two main unions involved in the strike.

Although Bus Eireann along with Dublin Bus and Iarnrod Eireann form part of the overall state-owned CIE transport group, the Expressway/Interregional service is run as a private company. Shane Ross, the Minister for Transport in the Fine Gael-led government, insists that because the major losses are being incurred by the private “Expressway” inter-city service, he will not intervene. Dismissing a call from Dermot O’ Leary, general secretary of the National Bus and Railworkers’ Union (NBRU)—the main union involved—for the transport minister to intervene, Ross told the Dail (parliament) last week, “I have made it absolutely clear that my intention during the dispute is to keep as far away from it as possible and to leave it to the two parties involved.”

Bus Eireann bosses claim the company lost over €9 million in 2016, and is facing insolvency by May this year unless the cuts to wages and conditions are implemented.

On February 27, management unilaterally went ahead with the introduction of 55 cost-cutting measures. Many workers face a 30 percent cut in take home pay

and overtime pay, which many drivers depend on. Over the past years, bus drivers and other transport workers have suffered a steady decline in pay and conditions due to the collaboration of the unions with the employers, often through the Labour Court and the Works Relations Commission (WRC). These are the main state-funded “arbitration” bodies with a record of enforcing the demands of the employers. The WRC acts as a cover by which the unions seek to agree to a slightly modified or amended version of the voracious demands of Bus Eireann.

In May 2013, a cost-cutting programme totalling €5 million, which included pay cuts, reductions in overtime pay and longer working hours, led to strike action by Bus Eireann workers. When the strike started, the unions insisted on a two-day “cooling off” period to enter talks at the Labour Relations Commission (LCR), predecessor of the WRC.

The present strike is directly connected with the collaboration of the unions, through the WRC, with the €5 million proposed 2013 cuts. These were modified by the unions for implementation. The unions have also colluded in the implementation of plans to privatise 10 percent of routes. At the beginning of March this year, they called off a planned strike to facilitate an earlier version of the current cuts through the WRC, with SIPTU sector representative Willie Noone stating, “It has always been apparent that the expertise of the WRC will be required to deal with the serious and complex issues involved in this dispute.”

The main opposition parties have all given rhetorical support to the striking workers, mainly criticising the refusal of the transport minister to intervene.

Sinn Fein’s transport spokesperson Imelda Munster called for Ross’s intervention, saying, “What’s come to light over recent months is that it is government

policy to decimate our public transport network, along with a race to the bottom on workers' rights, in order to groom it for privatisation."

The pseudo-left groups have also been vocal in the Dail and on the media in regarding the striking Bus Eireann workers.

On March 30, Brid Smith, a parliamentary deputy (TD) of the Socialist Workers Party/People Before Profit, spoke at length on the dispute on the television talk-show, "Tonight with Vincent Brown". She said the bus workers were incapable of bearing any more cuts to wages, before adding that the minister should intervene. In keeping with the close ties the pseudo-left has formed with the union bureaucracy and the Irish political establishment, there was no mention from Smith of the need to spread the dispute, let alone criticism of the collaboration of the trade unions with the agenda of the Bus Eireann management over the past years.

Mick Barry, TD of the Socialist Party and "Solidarity," the SP's newly named electoral front, proclaimed on the party's web site, "Ireland is consistently ranked one of the 20 richest countries in the world. It should have a world class public transport system... The unions at the company must demand that public transport be run as a service based on need rather on profit." Barry, who sits on the inter-party Dail Committee on Transport, offered no criticism of the union leaders. Nor did he call for bus workers to spread the strike to city buses and the trains.

Yet this is precisely what workers attempted to do. To the consternation of the union bosses, pickets were placed last Friday at dawn by Bus Eireann workers on city bus depots and trains. Hundreds of Dublin bus workers and Irish Rail workers refused to cross the picket lines bringing rail and city bus services to a virtual standstill for several hours. Transport Minister Ross, who had said he would not intervene in the dispute, now joined forces with the unions in condemning the workers "wildcat" action on morning radio. Ross, who was aware of the potential for the strike to spread, insisted, "It's absolutely appalling. It came as a complete surprise. What I'm doing now is appealing to the pickets to come off."

The pickets were also condemned promptly by Patricia King, general secretary of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU), who complained on RTE radio,

"The country's dispute resolution bodies did not respond well to that kind of event."

As the strike spread to Irish Rail and Dublin Bus services during the morning rush hour, NBRU boss O'Leary echoed the same appeal on morning radio, saying, "I've contacted colleagues across different areas of the country in the past few hours to try to get them to encourage some workers to cease their picketing. This is no way to conduct industrial relations."

O'Leary, when asked if his union had sanctioned the workers action, insisted he knew nothing about the picketing before it happened. "I'm urging those who are picketing to stop, and people should go to work immediately," he declared.

In previous strikes, the unions placed pickets in such a way that ensured the isolation of striking workers by encouraging other workers to enter and leave shared premises where no picket is placed. Bus Eireann depots are shared by rail workers at Iarnord Eireann.

The union bureaucrats above all fear an escalation of the strike action to other workers. By mid-morning Friday, the pickets had been cleared by the union officials who had spent the morning trying to persuade workers to abandon the solidarity action needed to defend themselves against the onslaught on wages and conditions.

While the union needed no additional encouragement for its strike breaking activity, Dublin Bus and Irish Rail officials are nevertheless suing the NBRU for hundreds of thousands of euros in damages suffered due to unofficial secondary picketing.

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