The Bank strike: What went wrong?

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struggle. They prefer sitting down with the bosses over a few drinks and cobbling together crap deals. This is what 'social partnership' means.

However the banks failed in their real objective, the smashing of the IBOA. What they did achieve was a change of mood. As a result of their experiences very few workers now believe that they are 'professionals' who enjoy a special relationship with their bosses. That is why so many of them are now describing themselves as bank workers and not 'bank officials'. This is why affiliation to the Irish Congress of Trade Unions was raised as the mass meetings around the country.

Thousands explicitly see themselves as workers and trade unionists. They have broken from much of the 'professionalism' that weighed them down. Their next step must be to discuss why the strike did not lead to an outright victory. The lessons drawn will point to the need for militancy and solidarity action, for rank & file control of struggles.

Cabinteely saw far more crossing the pickets. (To be accurate they were bussed in by Campbells Coaches). Mass pickets could have stopped this.

WAGES CHEQUES

It would have been difficult to keep customers out of the branches. Where were people to get their wages cheques cashed? Due to people moving their accounts in solidarity with the IBOA there was a 10 day wait to just open an account in the Trustee Savings Bank, where there was no dispute.

However it would have been possible, especially in the larger and better organised jobs, to force payment of wages in cash. Sadly there was no public appeal from the IBOA for this. There was not even a proper leaflet putting the case for pickets to be respected and for solidarity action by other workers.

Such action could have turned things around. SIPTU did not call on its members who are bank porters and caterers to come out. SIPTU also refused to call on security staff from Group 4, Securicor and Brinksmat to respect the pickets. Without cash deliveries the banks could not have remained open.

A PATHETIC EXCUSE

They did not even use the excuse of the Industrial Relations Act making sympathetic strikes illegal. They used the pathetic excuse that if unionised security workers didn't cross pickets their jobs would be taken by new non-union firms. In this case it was a nonsense. You can't set up overnight the sort of security operation required by the big banks.

And anyway, if a union the size of SIPTU can't defend its members' jobs and union rights it might as well throw in the towel now. It is more than capable of protecting its members, the difficulty is that the top bureaucrats aren't interested in

BANK WORKERS went back to work on April 27th. After three weeks on strike they voted narrowly to accept a revised offer from the big four banks.

The dispute began with a claim for a wage increase of 6.5%. The settlement only allowed for a 3% increase under the 'local bargaining' clause of the PESP, a lump sum of £1,000 in exchange for longer opening hours and one day's extra leave. The hidden agenda was the banks' desire to smash the staff union, the Irish Bank Officials Association.

Bank management remembered the last strike in 1976, when not a single IBOA member from branch manager downwards scabbed. They were determined to break the unity and confidence of the staff. Firstly they bought off most of the 1,000 managers by offering them individually negotiated increases (though in the case of at least 50 they failed as these well paid branch managers stood by their colleagues and walked the picket line).

THE RETURN OF WILLIAM MARTIN MURPHY

When the IBOA lodged its claim and balloted for industrial action managers called in staff individually. They were told that if they stuck with the IBOA their career prospects would be damaged, that they could wave goodbye to any ideas of promotion. In the Bank of Ireland they were told to sign a 1913 lock-out type of letter that they would not take industrial action. Refusal meant suspension.

Others were told they would never get house loans, temporary staff were told they would not be taken back unless they broke pickets and strong hints were made of transfers for union activists. This intimidation didn't frighten the workers, it angered them.

On January 20th action began with an overtime ban and a refusal to charge customers for services like bank drafts. AIB responded with suspensions and the other three banks announced they were imposing pay cuts of 20% on everyone supporting the action.

LIMITING THE CHANCE OF SUCCESS

It was only after 900 workers had been suspended that the IBOA executive used its mandate to call a strike in early April. A month previously the IBOA newsheet carried a front page article by General Secretary Ciaran Ryan saying that strikes are not the best way to force concessions and that 'limited industrial action' which would "not discommode bank customers nor destabilise existing relationships" was the way to win.

Lest we be unsure Ryan spelt it out on the 'Today Tonight' programme of March 4th. "We have said it. I've said it so many times publicly, we don't want to close the banks, we won't close the banks for any type of action, one day or full closure. That will not happen and I'm delighted to get the chance to say that here this evening. What we're doing is taking limited, and I would suggest, very responsible industrial action."

Maybe Ciaran's views reflect his background. He previously worked for the Federated Union of Employers. Two of the banks' negotiators used to be his juniors in the FUE. He now earns £80,000 a year as a union official. Not many people on that sort of wage belive in striking!

If the executive, who were deciding strategy, believed the 'new realist' nonsense about strikes no longer being effective it is hardly surprising they didn't come up with ways of winning the strike. In fact they had no clear plan for winning, just hopes that the Minister for Labour would intervene (impartially!) or that the Labour Relations Commission would give a favourable

ruling. It did, the problem being that it was favourable to the banks.

PUBLIC OPINION ISN'T ENOUGH

The executive believed that public opinion could win the dispute for them and that the government and its agencies would take a neutral position. Public opinion is a great aid in any dispute, it raises morale and can be of concrete use.

However it does not, on its own, force the bosses to give in. If ever there was a popular strike in was the 1984/5 Dunnes Stores anti-apartheid strike. Despite having the public, media figures, and clergy on their side they were outside the door for 18 months and ended up going back with only a partial victory.

The bank strike was winnable. Despite threats from management and having no strike fund, 70% of staff stuck with the IBOA. Pickets went on to every branch. So, what went wrong? What lessons are there for the future?

ANTI-SCAB PICKETS

Where scabs were going in there should have been large and loud pickets to let them know this was unacceptable and would remembered long after the strike was over. It could have kept all but the most hardened scabs out.

Mass pickets should have been placed on the computer centres. Close them down and all the banks other operations would have come to a halt. Management new this and well before the strike were working to break the power of the union by offering a mixture of threats and promises. The IBOA did not do much about it.

The result was that enough staff stayed in work to keep things ticking over. In AIB good union work kept the number in work to under 30% but the Bank of Ireland centre in