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Successful secondary pickets bring public transport to a halt in Ireland

8 days into inter-city strike solidarity given by city
bus and train drivers

Andrew Flood

March 31, 2017

Inter city bus workers in Ireland launched widespread secondary pickets at 4am this morning. Solidarity from transport workers at the other services picketed meant that most of the country ground to a halt as morning rush hour approached, almost all trains, Dublin bus and light rail services did not operate. The action is a clear demonstration of the power transport workers hold because of their position in economies.

This action took place on the 8th morning of a indefinite strike by the inter city bus drivers of Bus Eireann. In a familiar international pattern, this service had been deliberately starved of public funds over the last decade resulting in a deterioration in quality and an increase in ticket costs. As elsewhere the purpose of doing this is to soften up public attitudes towards privatisation of what becomes a 'broken' service.

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The state broadcaster (RTE) has played along with this agenda. (This would be shocking except that RTE always echo the government line). Almost every mention of the strike refers to Bus Eireann as ‘loss making’ — as if it should be about profit generation rather than service provision. In reality the service is ‘loss making’ because the subsidy it receives is less than that given to the millionaire owned horse racing industry (or indeed the same state broadcaster).

The cause of the dispute is a widespread attack on workers’ pay and conditions. Some bus drivers could lose as much as 30%. This would be no joke for any workers anywhere but in Ireland because of the crazy ‘property boom’ any such worker who borrowed money to buy a house in the last 10 years would almost certainly be now unable to make the repayments and would lose their home.

Government strategy has been to try and pretend the dispute is nothing to do with them and to be sorted out between workers and management. As the reason the service is ‘loss making’ is that the government cut the tiny subsidy public transport receives, deliberately creating the funding crisis, this is clearly a nonsense claim.

Bus Eireann got about 35 million in public funds last year but the Horse racing industry received 80 million and the Horse and Greyhound racing fund another 60 million. Although we don’t have the exact figures to hand we are confident the 110,000 people plus who use Bus Eireann for transport easily outnumber those travelling via race horse and greyhound, even though the millionaires who own those industries received a subsidy 4 times greater. No doubt the government would point the tourist benefit of horse racing and the jobs created around it, however that’s nothing in comparison with the tourist benefit of having a good public transport system that can get people around Ireland.

The action this morning contained 3 general lessons;

1. Public transport has to be viewed as a needed public service rather than a 'for profit' business. Huge numbers of people are dependent on public transport, the service needs to be expanded rather than underfunded as it has been in the last decades. In fact we need a massive expansion in public transport funding both to improve services and reduce ticket costs.
2. Workers in key sectors like transport have enormous power. Minister Shane Ross might have thought he was being clever by washing his hands of the dispute, this morning they have proved that the government cannot get away with that. 'Business as usual' will ground to a halt all over the country this morning as many workers are unable to get in on time.
3. The 1990 Industrial Relations Act made secondary picketing illegal. That's why the pickets this morning had hand written signs rather than the standard union branded ones. This morning we are seeing that the law isn't all powerful but also that the cost of making it illegal is no notice walk-outs, no one could 'give notice' without risking prosecution.

We should also recognise the courage of those picketing this morning, some of whom have talked to hostile state media who have broadcast their names despite the risk of being sued this opens them up to. Some have talked nonsense about the transport chaos being caused by a handful of picketers but not only is it clear that this was a well co-ordinated action across a large number of locations, the same industrial relations act only allows pickets of half a dozen.

The shutdown of the transport system will have a big impact on lots of workers, it will feel frustrating to many. But let's be clear – the blame for the disruption lies with the government and management that have tried to force further cuts through.

Until they took this action many people in the big we're ignoring the strike as it had little impact on them, this morning is a useful reminder that we should not treat public transport as an expected service but as something we need to actively defend.

Secondly and more importantly a victory for Bus Eireann workers is good for all of us despite the short term pain as it means a better public transport system and a blow against 'race to the bottom' conditions being imposed. The employers have used such tactics over the last 20 years to ensure a huge wealth transfer from us to them, it's long past time that was turned back and it can only be turned back by a hard fight. Because they have power as transport workers the bus workers at the tip of the spear are taking the big risks here, those of us who are will gain from any victory they may win should be willing to accept small sacrifices as part of the collective cost of struggle.

Victory for the bus workers is also important for almost everyone living on this planet. Why is that? The deliberate underfunding of public transport pushes those who can afford it towards using individual cars for the same journey. There are enormous differences in the amounts of climate change gases produced by cities in western Europe and north America for the simple reason that in the US private cars are far far more common for such journeys. At a global as well as a local level we need to recognise public transport for the essential good that it is and make sure funding is expanded.