

Cork Shop Workers Win Strike

ELC Bosses Learn the Hard Way

Kevin Doyle

1996

Victory is sweet. But all the more so when the contest is uneven. So it was with the strike at the Early Learning Centre (ELC) shop in Cork. At the beginning of June, after nearly six months of steadfast refusal, the ELC management caved in and conceded to the striking women on all their main demands – recognition of the workers' union, Mandate; phased introduction of the union pay rates; and a pension scheme. By any standards, it was an important win.

The strike began in December of last year, in the run up to Christmas. In the intervening period, the strikers walked the picket line for six out of every seven days of every week. This was a huge burden, given their small numbers.

Public support for the strike, and the support of other shop workers remained strong throughout the entire period, even despite repeated ploys by the ELC management to lure shoppers past the picket lines with various special sales and discount offers.

Matters only came to a head at the end of May, following the publication of the ELC's year-end report. This showed significant losses for the ELC chain of stores in southern Ireland in the last financial year – a result that was undoubtedly contributed to by the strike. It was on foot of this that management agreed to settle.

This is a great victory, but especially so because it is a vindication of the stand taken by the strikers. A long strike can be very demoralising, yet the six women remained determined throughout about their right to join a union, and about their right to have decent pay and conditions. In a climate that is increasingly antagonistic to such demands by workers, this took a lot of courage.

This strike victory will undoubtedly buoy up attempts to unionise the services sector generally, but particularly in Cork. So it should. Wages and conditions in many shops are very poor, and in some cases are deteriorating. But, this said, the length of this strike, and its isolation over the six month period, are a big worry.

Anyone looking to unionise might well balk at the prospect of having to go through such a long and difficult strike. At a time when many young workers are stuck in low paying jobs and are looking at union membership, this is a less than inspiring signal to be sending out.

It is well to remember that solidarity and blacking could have won this strike in weeks, and not months. A quick victory would have been a huge boost to unionisation efforts. But then this would have meant taking on current industrial legislation – a stand that Mandate's leadership

was never prepared to make. During the long six months of this dispute, the Mandate leadership did a little, but not a lot. Full credit must go to the ELC workers themselves.

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