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Team workers told not to expect a decent job

Ray Cunningham

1994

In recent months, over 1,500 workers at TEAM have been made redundant, a mass laying-off that dwarfs those at Digital and Irish Steel. We find out why...

It has been obvious for some time that all was not well with TEAM. In the run-up to the 1992 general election, local fears prompted Labour candidates in north Dublin to make the safeguarding of the jobs one of the main planks in their election campaigns. Since then, of course, Labour TDs who were swept into office on the promise of an immediate equity injection have followed the government line that no cash will be given unless the workers accept the management's cost-cutting proposals.

The workers were also aware that TEAM was in serious trouble. Indeed, Aer Lingus workers initially refused to be seconded to the new company, feeling that management was incapable of running such an enterprise. They only agreed to the move when assured that Aer Lingus would take them back should TEAM fail. (Management has now gone back on this

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saying that any TEAM workers returning to the parent company would immediately be sacked.)

As time went on, the unions commissioned business consultants to produce a report on TEAM Aer Lingus. Not surprisingly, their recommendations were ignored by a management seemingly intent on running TEAM into the ground.

Practically since its conception, workers have been making sacrifices to try to ensure TEAM's survival. Pay freezes and productivity deals have saved the company millions, but management keeps coming back looking for more. Agreements dating back to 1986 have been renegotiated, and it seemed that workers would allow all the responsibility for TEAM's problems to be laid at their door, accepting any cuts to save their jobs.

Management just kept looking for more cuts. An agreement reached in March of this year was no longer enough, and now workers are being told that they must accept a 16% wage cut, and an end to overtime pay – which translates for some into losses of over #100 a week.

Action had to be taken, but what sort of action? Most of the energy has gone into negotiations inside TEAM, with little effort being made to secure the support of other workers. Alongside this a campaign directed at forcing the eight Labour TD's in the area to break with the government was waged. Four did indeed break (on a single Dail vote) but this has proved to be of little value.

The appeal to the Labour Relations Commission proved unsuccessful but still the unions seemed eager to show that they were reasonable and open to negotiation. It was obvious that TEAM management and the government would only negotiate on their own terms. Although the unions had proposed a plan to save TEAM, they were told that the LRC recommendations had to be implemented before this could even be discussed.

At the time of writing, the intervention of ICTU has led to the examination of the union plan by to save the company by

an 'independent committee', It was no surprise when the committee reported back that the plan was unrealistic, putting the 'realism' of making profit above the needs of the workers.

The causes of the job cuts and attacks on workers conditions in TEAM are international. They come about as a result of European integration and the drive for the various European airlines to be merged into a few super airlines. Because the process is part of modern capitalism it is not one that any government can easily be forced to back down on. The defeat that needs to be inflicted on the government cannot come about as a result of public relations and negotiating, no matter how skilled those carrying out the exercise may be.

Many of the workers in TEAM doubted they had the power and the necessary support to win through strikes and occupations. These are indeed tough times but the numbers of TEAM workers turning up to the original demonstrations showed there was something to build on. The limited solidarity of those airport workers who walked off the job several times for union meetings also pointed away forwards.

Finally there was a small layer of union activists willing to get involved. They probably represented little, many being drawn from the ranks of the far-left but if the TEAM workers had taken the lead they could have started to organise solidarity with them. This was most marked within the Dublin Council of Trade Unions, which called a march in support of TEAM and looked at the idea of calling a limited public sector stoppage.

But on their own the tiny forces of the Trades Council and the far-left can not organise effective action. What is needed is for the TEAM workers to set a militant example and inspire active support. Occupation of the runways would probably be the most effective way forwards but like any effective action would bring workers outside the law. As such it would have involved real risks for individuals and met with the opposition of the union officials. But this is the only way the dispute can

be won. TEAM cannot stand alone but it is only the TEAM workers who can start the ball rolling.