

Fighting for union rights & better pay

Strike at the Early Learning Centre

Workers Solidarity Movement

1996

WORKERS AT the Early Learning Centre Toy Shop, in Cork, have been on strike since early December. Management at the Cork store, have refused to recognise the workers' union, Mandate, or to negotiate on pay and conditions. So far the strikers, all women, have been able to maintain a highly effective picket on the shop. Workers Solidarity spoke to the workers in January as the sales got underway. The shop was, once again, empty of customers.

-> Over the busy Christmas and New Year period, you have had a big effect. Few people seem to have passed the picket line?

It has been massive. Yeah. We reckon that there has been over a quarter of a million in losses at the shop, for the sake of £150 divided by six workers, a week. We're out nearly five weeks now and it's possible that something will be happening in the Labour Court. Hopefully they'll do something in our favour, and that it won't be just for the employer.

-> That's the problems with the Labour Court.

It's a problem getting anything there. It's a challenge.

-> How many of you are out on strike?

Well, there's six of us that work all the time in there, permanently, but two of the staff that were taken on for the Christmas came out also, because they wouldn't pass a picket.

-> What are you looking for?

Our main crib, really, is that in six years we've got on average only 10p per year rise on our hourly rate. If you came into this job tomorrow, even with no qualifications and with no experience in retailing, you would get the same money as any of us. Even those of us who are here for six years. As well as this, we're two pounds an hour underpaid to the trade rate in Cork, that's the union rate. We joined the union in May, and the company won't recognise us. They refuse to recognise the union. Basically, there is to be no pay increase this year, and we've been told by our own manager, inside, that we won't be getting the next one until 1997. More than likely that will be under ten pence an hour again. On top of this, we're doing a lot more than we should as shop assistants. They expect us to unload the articulated lorries that pull up with supplies. There could be anything between seven and ten pallets a week. That stuff has to be taken upstairs. We have to clean the place and also do the lock-up and security. We're asked to read course books — distance learning books — also, once a month. There's nothing extra for any of that.

-> There's also the issue of pensions?

All the British workers are in their pension scheme. We're here six years. They say it's very hard for an Irish pension company to take us on and that the tax system here is a bit different to theirs. Excuses. Being fobbed off again. Also, everything is set by sales targets and they're set artificially. They've opened shops in Limerick and Waterford recently, lets say, on both sides of us here in Cork. So in Cork, obviously, we've lost customers to both Waterford and Limerick — people that would previously have shopped here. But, then, they keep upping the targets for this store here, which means you can't achieve them. You don't get a bonus, you don't get a wage increase, because you're not making this target all the time. But the target has never actually come down, even though they've opened these other stores. No allowance is made for that. That kind of thing.

-> Who is setting these targets? Is it management in the shop in Cork?

Personnel management within the stores itself. It would actually be set from Swindon in England, at Head Office. They set them for each individual store. Each shop gets a budget every year to work through. That's being kept down all the time. Bonuses come from that. You get nothing as a result. I got one bonus — £8 for a year's work, and my next one was £32 for another year's work, before tax and PRSI! You get nothing at Christmas, just one card between everybody in the shop. A mass-produced card. Your name isn't even mentioned on it.

-> And what about The Early Learning Centre Toy Shops? Is it a big company?

There's two hundred and nine shops in the chain. They are a multinational.

-> You mentioned they had other shops in Ireland?

They have a massive problem with staff turnover everywhere. It got so bad in England that they had to an 'Exit' interview — which means you have to give your reasons for why you are leaving. They know there is a problem. But they don't want to listen either. Look at the reasons we have here. We're here six years. The job situation here is different to in England. You can walk out more easily there. It doesn't work like that in this country. You just have one job.

-> The picket has been well supported by the public. What other support have you got?

It was a very bad time to go out. Christmas is a very rushed time of the year. And, in fairness, people from Marks & Spencer came over to us with collections and things like that, and we really appreciate that. Dunnes Stores and Roches Stores staff also held collections at Christmas for us. We appreciate that. We also like to thank the people from Socialist Worker, who've been great bringing coffee and tea. And even a few people in the street — it may only be a pound or two — but they say, here get a cup of coffee. Fantastic. It was worth a million pounds to us.

SHORTLY AFTER the strike began at the Early Learning Centre, workers at the nearby Marks & Spencer (M&S;) branch, on Patrick's Street in Cork, said they would join the picket during their lunch break to show their support for the strikers. Management at the Early Learning Centre found out about this. They contacted their own Head Office in Swindon, who, in turn, contacted M&S;'s Head Office, also in England. M&S; in England then sent a memo to the M&S; shop in Cork ordering the workers there not to join the picket at the Early Learning Centre. Who says the bosses don't stand together? The M&S; workers, in Cork, told their own management where to get off — they joined the picket!

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