

For Aer Lingus Workers, Air France shows the way

Workers Solidarity Movement

1994

Contents

DIRECT ACTION GETS THE GOODS	3
HITTING THEM HARD	3

IT WAS A DEFEAT! 780 jobs are to go in Aer Lingus. The PESP increases for 1990–93 won't be paid. Increments won't be paid. The SIPTU leaders, at both national and local level, didn't want a fight. They agreed to refer the pay issue to a supposedly "impartial" tribunal ...which ruled that there be a pay freeze until 1995.

European economic integration means among other things that the large industries in each country are going to merge by a process of take-overs and closures. Recently BMW's take-over of Rover provided an example of this. Many of these industries have been protected from competition and/or subsidised for years because the bosses of the country concerned felt it was in their interests to ensure access to vital goods or services. Now it appears they want European access but as usual they are expecting the working class to pay for the handover

In 1997 European air transport is to be deregulated. This means that individual airlines will no longer be able to maintain monopolies or cartels on home routes or (in theory) receive aid from their respective governments. The process is accompanied by privatisation's, the likely end result will be a couple of European super airlines as the smaller ones get swallowed up. The various national airlines are gearing up for this period of more intense competition.

Workers in both France and Ireland were told they would have to accept redundancies and worsening working conditions for the sake of the company. In Ireland it's called the Cahill plan, in France it was the Attali plan. Different names, same idea. Air France wanted 4,000 lay-offs and wage cuts. Aer Lingus were looking for 1,500 redundancies and a two year pay freeze. This along with the abolition of overtime and dramatic cuts in shift pay.

DIRECT ACTION GETS THE GOODS

Initially the workers reacted angrily to these proposed cuts, when 300 TEAM workers were laid off they blocked the roads around the airport resulting in reinstatement. On the 17th of July last year workers closed down Dublin Airport for two hours to hold a union meeting. In the last issue of Workers Solidarity we said an all-out strike closing all the airports could win but it was useless to expect the union bureaucracy to provide the lead.

Unfortunately the bureaucracy remained in tight control of the dispute. They led it down the road of compromise with management in the name of some 'common interest'. There is no common interest between bosses and workers. Instead of opposing job losses and pay cuts they tried to limit the scale of them. This 'partnership' idea is similar to that of the PESP, PNR and the soon to be Plan for Competitiveness & Work. The truth behind all these deals is that they make workers pay for the bosses' problems. The failure of this strategy is seen when events in Aer Lingus are compared with those in Aer France.

October 12th was a trade union day of action throughout the French public sector. When it ended the Air France workers stayed out. They refused to be intimidated by all the legal pressure and riot police the state could bring to bear. They occupied the runways and fought off the cops. Result, after two weeks the Attali plan was scrapped and the head of the airline forced to resign.

HITTING THEM HARD

The strength of the French workers came from two areas. Firstly the militancy of their strike and the closing of the airports hit Air France hard. It was losing directly over 10 million dollars a day

and foreign carriers were threatening to sue for the losses involved in re-directed and delayed flights.

The second reason was the government was afraid of the strike spreading. Bernard Bosson, the Minister for Transport, said "This is not a strike but a revolt" ...and in France there is a lot to revolt about. Unemployment, although well below the Irish level, at 12% is the highest since the end of the second World War. Job losses and pay cuts are threatened everywhere. Just before the strike some 35,000 rail workers marched in Paris, during the strike over 10,000 teachers marched. The French ruling class can still remember the revolt of 1968 when the demands of the strikers went from economic demands to political ones and threatened France with revolution.

Union leaders in Ireland are so caught up in the concept of 'social partnership' and the unions so restricted by their compliance with the Industrial Relations Act that they are incapable of leading even the most basic fights. The Pat the Baker strike showed them standing by confused and helpless as one gombeen boss told the largest union in the country to get stuffed. That strike could have been won by blacking the bread early on but the bureaucrats just hummed and hawed.

In Aer Lingus they channelled the workers' anger into a damage limitation exercise. Yet European workers have clearly demonstrated that the bosses can be beaten if we ignore their laws and strike to win. It's no use waiting for the Irish union leaders to change their attitude, workers have to take the running of disputes into their own hands.

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