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1996

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Teaching the bosses a lesson

Interview with an An Post striker

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The media reported the recent dispute in An Post over external recruitment. But in all the newspaper articles and TV coverage one voice was missing – that of the workers involved. Workers Solidarity spoke to an activist in the Civil & Public Service Union who was on the picket line.

Can you tell us the background to the recent dispute and how did it arise?

When secretarial vacancies became available management used the services of a private recruitment agency to organise a farcical competition process in which only one of our members succeeded. They then proceeded to fill the remaining vacancies by external recruitment on a highly selective and suspect basis, and then paid the new recruits £110 per week more than our members currently performing the work.

These secretaries work to the senior managers. Other vacancies in An Post have remained unfilled for years, i.e. they have been effectively suppressed.

What were the first proposals by management?

Initially management made us absolutely no offers. They simply made up the rules as they went along, giving us one day's notice of bringing in an external recruit despite our protests. But once members moved quickly to take industrial action with a work to rule/limited telephone embargo, management responded by taking members off the payroll on the one hand and by offering compensatory terms on the other exactly one week later.

They wanted four external recruits and in return offered to uplift all current secretaries to the new pay structure/grade, to promote 12 members to vacant higher grades and to release eight other staff already awaiting promotion. These negotiations ended at 5am on 24 April 1996. The negotiating team agreed to recommend this offer because we believed that there was nothing more of substance to be gained.

Specifically, we made the judgement that we could not win the two key demands of members, i.e. to stop management bringing in external recruits and to get a guarantee against any future external recruitment. In essence, we were proved right because, although we got better terms in the final deal (five weeks later), neither of these key goals were achieved.

However, members decided that they wanted to give the company a bruising and they lashed us out of it for recommending these terms. One member even good-naturedly referred to us as 'The Birmingham Six', i.e. that we'd sign anything at 5.00am. The deal was rejected 4:1.

Crucially, members demanded monetary compensation for the manner of their suspensions, in addition to the goals already mentioned. The lesson was clear. We misread the mood of members who, by now, were so frustrated with the machinations of management that they were determined to teach them a lesson they wouldn't forget in a hurry. In short, it is necessary to let struggle decide what it is possible to win.

What sort of difficulties did you encounter during the dispute?

The Industrial Relations Act was used by union headquarters to limit and isolate our action at every turn. Isn't it ironic that we have a minister (Pat Rabbitte) in the Cabinet who penned a pamphlet warning against the dangers of the IR Act before it became law and a trade union leadership determined to use it to stymie our actions in every way. Specifically, we had to fight tooth and nail to get clearance for strike action.

Headquarters continually prevented us from escalating the action. It wasn't until 270 of our 500 members were suspended that they eventually agreed to allow us to ballot on strike. They refused to ballot our members in the National Lottery (whose employer is also An Post) on spurious legal grounds.

Members have voted ritually down the years to condemn the Act but these developments made the matter concrete in very dramatic way. Everybody was sickened by the manoeuvres of Head Office and the official was regularly savaged at meetings.

Secondly, we had a huge problem with scabbing during the dispute. Members of the Association of Higher Civil Servants (AHCS) openly performed our work in the key operational areas of Savings & Investments. We had a similar problem during a dispute last year and we called at the time for the expulsion of the AHCS from the Irish Congress of Trade Unions. This resulted in a polite exchange of letters between our General Secretary and Peter Cassells. It goes without saying that nothing was done.

Our Head Office compounded the problem this year by inviting the AHCS head honcho to our annual conference where he was wined and dined during the dispute! This has only strengthened the resolve of members to a) boot AHCS out of Congress and b) it has put a question mark over our continued membership of the CPSU.

We also encountered a lot of police interference, including special branch intimidation, on the picket line in response to our harassment of the scabs. This has put the issue of possible

victimisation to the fore and we will be watching and waiting for any such move.

What was the final settlement and how was it reached?

Final terms were brokered by a mediator from the state-backed Labour Relations Commission after much jockeying for position. Typically these so-called independents invariably look at what management want and ask the union side to swallow 70% of it. Increasingly, they refuse even to bring forward formal offers unless the union negotiating team is prepared to recommend it to members in advance! They won't risk their reputation as successful brokers unless they can be guaranteed a good chance of acceptance.

The final terms were as follows: Three external recruits were proposed. A new secretarial competition to be held to fill a further three posts. If they are not filled internally the matter will be referred to a third party. 17 promotions were offered as well as an interest free loan of £450 repayable over 15 months; no loss of seniority, service or other employment benefits as a result of the dispute; and the matter of payment to staff removed from the payroll to be referred to a third party for adjudication.

I was alone on the negotiating team in calling for rejection of the offer. I sensed that members were willing to stick it out for a better deal. I objected to the notion of settling on the basis of referring key issues to arbitration — where they are likely to be buried. In particular I objected to the principal of the interest free loan and demanded a lump sum instead. Why should we pay for ourselves to return to work? The final result was 60% in favour of the deal and 40% against.

What is the atmosphere like following this settlement?

Members who voted against acceptance were inevitably disappointed but overall members returned with a keen sense of having licked the company good and proper, albeit at some personal cost to our pockets. We are all still awaiting the outcome of a Tribunal process (initiated last year) dealing with

much bigger issues like the 3% PESP pay increase, threatened introduction of temporary workers/part-timers, changed work practices, etc. Members are bracing themselves for that battle as well.

On a personal level how would you assess the dispute and what lessons can be drawn from it?

This deal represents a solid victory on our part. Management have been given a bloody nose but like any beaten contender they will be back for a re-match, so we can't afford to be complacent about what has been won.

Some activists argued that because of the larger battle looming in the shape of the Tribunal mentioned above, it was necessary to settle to conserve our strength — that it is no use winning the battle and losing the war and so on. I don't hold with that logic. We cannot choose the timing of our battles. The determination of members to fight again will depend on the conduct and outcome of this dispute.

Important links were built during the dispute with members in other unions in An Post, especially the postal workers of the Communication Workers Union. Left activists ritually talk about the need to build such links, but it was absolutely vital in our case because of the sharing of information and building solidarity in terms of morale as well as money.

We also set up a strike committee to involve members outside the official committee structure in handling the dispute. We issued strike bulletins and kept members constantly informed at mass meetings. Notwithstanding Head Office's foot dragging, this dispute was run by our members. The shots were called by us. This has incredibly strengthened the branch. As they say, things will never be the same again.