

What happened in the An Post dispute

Fighting casualisation in An Post

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THE ONGOING economic slump has seen the ruling class trying to make us pay for their crisis. The employers wish for a free hand to introduce wage cuts and speedups while the government cuts deeper into the social wage. They don't quite have it all their way however as the unions, although greatly weakened, can still fight back – particularly in the public service.

One weapon the employers have used in the last few years to weaken workplace organisation and to drive wages down is casualisation. This normally involves replacing full time jobs with pensions, sick pay and holiday rights with part time workers who are commonly employed on a week to week basis and have few rights. Another part of the same process is the hiring of workers on individual contracts and/or as contractors. Both of these greatly weaken the existing work place and union organisation and both result in large savings for the employers as wages are cut and there is no longer any need to cover sick pay, holidays or pensions.

CASUALISATION

The An Post dispute which ended in June should be seen in the context of a fight against casualisation by a well organised workforce. The origins of the dispute go back to March 1990 when the Communication Workers Union (CWU) National Executive agreed with An Post's plan to introduce to casual workers. An emergency motion at the CWU conference in May however instructed the Executive to oppose the introduction of casuals. This did not prevent the Executive from agreeing to allow casuals into the Central Sorting Office (CSO) in Dublin's Sheriff Street. This move was however prevented by the CWU branch there.

The bosses' press proceeded to attack the postal workers for earning "huge amounts" of money and stopping the creation of new jobs. In reality however the An Post "viability plan" called for the destruction of 1500 full-time jobs, some of which would be replaced with casual workers. The relatively high earnings some post workers were taking home were a result of working weekends and double shifts. High perhaps relative to the generally rotten wages those of us with poorly paid jobs get but probably well below what Chief Executive John Hynes would spend on a night out. The union members wanted this overtime to be replaced with 400 full time jobs.

The alternative favoured by An Post was to employ casual workers under far worse conditions than the permanent workforce. Casual workers were to have no job security, they would be employed on a week to week basis. They would also be expected to be completely flexible in terms of working hours so that they would not know from week to week when they would be working or even if they would be working.

MEDIA BLACKOUT

There was a virtual media blackout of the Unions version of the dispute. A march in February this year of some 7000 post workers opposing the "viability plan" received no media coverage. The dispute started when the government gave the go ahead to the An Post management to take on casuals despite the unions' position. Union members refused to work alongside the casuals and by the third day of the dispute 700 members were suspended. The workers in the wages department refused to put the casuals on the payroll and the executive used this as an excuse to

cut 1600 Dublin workers off the payroll. Eventually 1800 were to be suspended and 2500 cut off the payroll.

At this stage the union bureaucrats started to undermine the dispute. A motion for full strike action was defeated and the fact that Dublin work was being diverted outside of Dublin was suppressed. The union bureaucrats relied on public opinion and legal action through the courts to win the dispute. Although public support for the postal workers was important it would only have had a major impact on the dispute if it had generated solidarity action in related industries like Telecom. The bosses courts, as might be expected, gave the union a useless decision.

The Dublin Outdoor Branch, however, decided to get suspended members to attend for work in Sheriff Street. This resulted in a virtual occupation of the CSO which forced An Post to withdraw the casual workers. Five weeks into the dispute a lunchtime march of 5000 workers went to the Dáil. An Post was also under pressure by the approach of the Maastricht Referendum, the smooth functioning of which would require a full postal service. The union executive and management reached a 'compromise'. A national ballot voted to accept the settlement by 6 to 1.

NOT A VICTORY

The settlement however although appearing to be a compromise in reality strongly favoured An Post. An Post agreed to create 140 permanent jobs but these are subject to a let out clause which targets these jobs for future redundancies. The ratio of casual to permanent jobs was not fixed leaving An Post to set this as they wish. In addition although improvements were won in the casual contracts they will still be subject to "suitability and availability of work". This means casual workers can be dismissed easily and so activists among the casual workers can easily be victimised.

This settlement will be little more than a temporary lull for management to regain its breath. An Post still intend to carry on with the "viability plan" which will involve job losses and making the workers pay for modernisation. Post workers were hit financially by the dispute which lost many of them six weeks pay. Five members of the CWU Outdoor Branch committee were forced to resign in order to argue against accepting the deal, otherwise they would have been forced by the policy of collective responsibility to argue for accepting the deal.

CONFIDENCE OR DEPENDENC?

On the other hand however the dispute did demonstrate a high level of solidarity amongst postal workers. The fact that support was solid in those branches where members were suspended and the high turn out of postal workers on the two demonstrations demonstrate this. Some of the casual workers supported the CWU position and importantly collections took place among Telecom workers. This solidarity could be built on to win the next stage of the dispute and defeat the An Post plan.

Some of the left, in particularly 'Militant', have said the dispute shows that what is needed is a strong trade union leadership prepared to take on the bosses and the government. However we would argue that what the left should be doing is building a confident rank and file movement in the workplaces which will take the running of disputes into its hands rather than waiting for bureaucratic betrayal. The resignation of the left from the Outdoor branch committee demonstrates

that even at the lowest levels of the union a relatively strong left presence can be muzzled by the rule book. Socialists should run for these positions but with the aim of winning arguments in the rank and file rather than seeing this as a way of transforming the unions. Dependence on the most left wing leaders is never as good as the activity of a confident membership.

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