

Cork Strikers need more support

Kevin Doyle

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The strike at the Early Learning Centre (ELC) shop in Cork continues. The strikers have now been out since early December and so far, despite widespread public support and great determination, the company has refused to recognise the workers' union, Mandate. Instead, management has responded with some very minor concessions on pay and pension rights. On the core issue of union recognition, the company has said that it 'may recognise the union if the workers settle', but not until after January, 1997!

The ELC company has already spent a considerable amount of money on publicising its case in order to get more of the public to cross the picket line – a policy that hasn't worked. It has also employed a full time security man to monitor the picketers. So far it has been estimated that the ELC has spent nearly £25,000 on direct advertising against the strikers – a sum of money that would have paid their demands in full for nearly three.

LOW PAY=HIGH PROFITS

From this fact alone it is clear that the ELC management is deeply fearful of any union involvement at any of its shops. Low pay is the hallmark of the ELC's current high profits. It has adopted a policy of attrition against the strikers from the outset. Publicly it is offering very minor concessions; in practice it out to defeat this attempt at unionisation once and for all. So far attempts at reaching a settlement via the Labour Relations Commission have not been successful. It is highly unlikely that they ever will. It must be borne in mind that the ELC company will be unenthusiastic about any meditated settlement until and unless it is forced to be.

Workers do not have the resources for a very long strike. With over 200 shops in Ireland and the UK, and with the backing of the its parent group, Menzies, the ELC can withstand an isolated strike like this for as long as it takes. If nothing else, this current dispute shows the limits of such an uneven battle – when workers don't win wider support. This support must be built now.

What can be done:

Within Mandate: Mandate workers throughout Ireland are familiar with the ongoing ongoing fight against low pay and casualisation. Shop-stewards in Cork should be approached by the strikers to organise an immediate letter to the Mandate executive asking it to:

- Sponsor a Mandate led march in Cork in support of strikers.
- Sponsor a regular mass picket every Saturday.

Outside Mandate: A Strike Support Group should be initiated by the strikers. The strikers should retain full control over this group. Its principal activities should be to win wider trade union support for the strike, and to spread news about the strike outside of Cork – especially to the other towns that have ELC shops: Belfast, Waterford, Limerick, Galway, and Dublin.

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