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Ireland

Workers' resistance at Ryanair

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The sight of Michael O'Leary, who declared once that Hell would freeze over before he would allow a trade union in to Ryanair, having to eat his words is indeed enough to bring a glow to the heart of any class conscious worker. At the company AGM in the Autumn O'Leary gloated that "I don't even know how there would be industrial action in Ryanair, ... There isn't a union."! So how then was this victory achieved?

Solidarity

The pilots and crew's struggle with Ryanair is a lesson in what constitutes effective trade unionism. On the ground activism, self organisation and above all practical solidarity, in this case international solidarity. It was this which put 'the skids' under the self professed "tough guy" of Irish industrial relations.

The workforce, welded together by the Europe wide airline network, began to flex its considerable muscle on the back of labour shortages which saw thousands of flights cancelled. Instead of staff which are normally divided by which trade union they belong to, or their geographic location Ryanair found itself confronted by workers across its entire European network. The establishment of that network, the physical reality of Ryanair as a European wide business, created the material basis for a powerful unified workforce. In that sense it created the objective conditions for the international solidarity that confronted it.

Pan European fightback

The summer and Autumn of 2017 was marked by waves of strikes and industrial unrest among Pilots, Air Traffic Controllers and ground staff across the European aviation industry revealing the potential power of a European working class united in action. The prospect of pilots stopping work in France, Germany, Ireland, Italy and Portugal simultaneously raised hopes for a co-ordinated fightback against "poverty wages", while the strikes which went ahead in Italy added palpable substance to that potential.

Ryanair pilots had been working towards creating a "pan-European union" which voted to take industrial action during the Christmas period. A central committee had been formed to replace the Employee Representative Committees (ERCs), small fragmented groups representing individual airports, in order to "oppose the longstanding strategy of divide and conquer that Ryanair has applied in its dealing with pilots" and they announced that they were prepared to take "casualties" in a long struggle requiring "stamina and commitment from every pilot".

So what drove O'Leary to officially recognise trade unions was a determined self-organised workforce and their threat of an effective strike, proved in this case by their clearly exhibited organisational ability. It was the spectre of this pan European unity and international co-ordination that caused

O'Leary to look around for a way to deal with his unruly workers and he concluded that official union recognition was the best way to do that, making it explicitly clear in the process that he did so in order to avert a strike. This is not as ironic as it first appears, only a cursory look at the trade union bureaucracy's leadership record reveals their unerring ability to quickly turn workers' action into negotiations and ultimately into disappointing outcomes.

The Ryanair workers' victory

The victory over the arrogant anti-union ethos spearheaded by Ryanair is a victory for all workers in Ireland and throughout Europe. Apart from the 'political' nature of the victory official recognition undoubtedly brings more mundane but nevertheless important benefits. Certain protections are afforded to the workers now, there is more chance that due process will be observed in issues of discipline, there will be more security in employment and now the exploitative anti worker nature of the contracts which pilots and cabin staff work under can be more openly campaigned against by the staff on the ground.

On the other hand, the planned series of international strikes, which would have been a masterclass in the effectiveness of co-ordinated industrial action, has been headed off into a series of national agreements on recognition of unions at the various European locations which the bourgeois press hopefully reported will give Ryanair "some leeway to negotiate separately".

It is clear that breaking up this international co-ordination and solidarity is behind O'Leary's insistence that "Ryanair will not engage with pilots who fly for competitor airlines in Ireland or elsewhere" as he seeks national union agreements to undermine the pilots' central committee and to break down the possibility of solidarity spreading across the European aviation industry.

Workers must retain control

The advances achieved are to the credit of the workers themselves. By their own actions they have bent the company's will to the workers agenda. But with the ensconcement of the bureaucrats, the game has changed. These battles have culminated only in recognition for the union bureaucracy to negotiate on the workers' behalf. The grievances still exist, remaining to be argued out now in a boardroom rather than through mass confrontation and industrial action. The decision making process and leadership has taken a step away from employee level.

Although the employee's determined actions have given a boost to whatever team of bureaucrats takes over the task of further negotiation on their behalf, their fate, if they allow it, will now be removed subtly from their own hands. No longer will industrial relations be conducted by self-organised pilots and staff threatening international strike action, it will be the business of appointed full timers and certain "rules" and "considerations" apply.

Not only will that bureaucracy act as a full time professional team, conveying the staff's grievances to the management, they will convey the management's demands directly to the shop floor, usually dressed up in the

language of “realism”. The full time bureaucrats' role as mediators means they have, according to the mantra, a “responsibility” to the company to ensure its “future profitability” as an “important employer” going forward. Any trade union member that has experienced the lay-offs, pay freezes or cuts of the last decade will recognise this “two way” process which in reality grants continual concessions to aggressive employers and to the fiscal terms dictated by the state.

If the pilots and cabin crew relinquish control of the agenda to the bureaucrats, periods of confrontation with the company will result in the same familiar pattern followed by the rest of the trade union movement. Frustration becomes the threat of strike action, which in turn is quickly diverted into arbitration, in practical terms binding, and demobilisation. A pattern repeatedly witnessed, most recently by the Bus Eireann, Dublin Bus and Iarnrod Eireann workers.

The prospect of solidarity

The prospect of working class solidarity across Europe is what O'Leary fears most and he has his eye on this as he continues with what the pilots central committee described as his “divide and rule strategy”. He attempts to exclude the possibility of solidarity with other groups of pilots, seeking to gain “leeway” by breaking the negotiating body down into national segments. This is a rearguard action designed to break the workers organisation down into national negotiating committees that resemble his beloved ERC's and remove the aspect of the struggle which gave the initial phase its power. In this, Ryanair management faces little resistance from the various self interested national union bureaucracies.

In their struggle with employers, workers need to stamp their own authority on their trade unions and overcome the bureaucratic layer that sits atop them by self-organised rank and file activity. As the union bureaucracy takes its place at the table with Ryanair there are high expectations. Their weaknesses will appear all the more starkly in the eyes of workers that have behind them the experience of a well organised and protracted struggle with an aggressive employer.

Ryanair workers have provided evidence that the most practical and effective answer to the power of international capitalism is international solidarity. Thanks to their struggle, we caught a fleeting glimpse of that potential just before it was arrested and diverted by O'Leary's tactical retreat. The struggle now for the pilots and crew of Ryanair is to resist O'Leary's plans for separate national negotiations and to maintain their independence and international self-organisation, it has already proved successful and can be again if applied in the coming battles.

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PS:

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