

Defending Natalia

Defending the Right to Protest



Pickets in Dublin and Brighton on the 4th April Day of Action in Defence of Natalia Szymanska - unfortunately in Belfast pickets were limited to one hour picket at one franchise with limited numbers as a result of court action.

Natalia Szymanska, a 19 year old Polish woman, was sacked from a Subway franchise on Great Victoria Street, Belfast during her fifth month of pregnancy on a dubious charge of being in breach of the company's health and safety policy. 'Coincidentally' this happened just a month after Natalia had informed her boss that she was pregnant.

Despite repeated attempts by the Belfast Trades Council to engage with this employer to resolve the issue the employer remained intransigent, hostile and has attempted to gag the movement that is supporting Natalia.

The claimed grounds for firing her was that she allowed her boyfriend, also a Subway

employee, into the store while she locked up so that he could walk her home. This is despite the fact that senior management previously accepted that Natalia's partner regularly came to the shop as she was pregnant. CCTV recordings and other evidence which would prove that Natalia was correct were denied to her representatives.

Natalia's supporters are campaigning for her immediate reinstatement, reimbursement of lost earnings, compensation for injury to her feelings and demanding that all workers are treated fairly. Organise! has been supporting the Belfast Trades Council pickets of the Subway franchise Natalia was fired from since the start of this dispute. We were also central to the

organisation of the Day of Action of 4th April. On the day pickets occurred in Belfast, Brighton, Cheltenham, Cork, Derry, Dublin, Glasgow, Galway, Greenwich (U.S.), Liverpool and 3 pickets took place in London.

Dublin's contribution to the day of action saw the longest established and best known branch in the city, in Nassau Street, suffer an almost total shutdown of its lunchtime trade. At any time there were at least a dozen people outside with posters and leaflets.

In the run up to the Day of Action however a number of individuals from the Belfast Trades Council were the subject of court actions which resulted in them signing undertakings that severely limited action in the city. Only the franchise that Natalia was fired from was picketed, despite the fact that two other franchises in Belfast are held by the same employers. The picket that did take place was restricted to an hours duration and limited to 6 people to be named by the Trades Council. Members of Organise! turned out in support only to be turned away by nominated Trades Council pickets as a result of the court undertakings. All material to do with the case had to be removed from their website and basically no 'libellous' information about the sacking could be included in leaflets supporting Natalia.

The Trades Council may have been legally prevented from conducting an effective campaign in Natalia's defence - turning this campaign into a 'right to protest' issue. We need to show that working class activists fighting for the rights of women and immigrant workers cannot and will not be silenced. This issue and this campaign are bigger than simply the Trades Council and now have a bearing on any solidarity actions carried out in defence of workers who have been unfairly treated or who are in dispute with their bosses. We will not be gagged.

Ulsterbus Redundancies

A threat at Christmas of 10 or 12 workers losing their jobs at Derry's Foyle Street Ulsterbus depot has been increased to between 21 and 24 workers, mainly on the Derry to Limavady route. Ulsterbus chief executive, Catherine Mason indicated that this may be just the start of a wider 'rationalisation' campaign across the north and voluntary redundancies have been mooted as a result of workers' determination to fight back. Derry 'wans' have a reputation for whinging but the axe almost always seems to fall first in the west before reaching other parts, and if Translink aren't halted in Foyle Street this will quickly spread out to other areas. Bad as this is for Derry and local workers, it is a further kick in the teeth for Limavady people. This route has died down since Seagate closed their factory in the town with the loss of 900 jobs last year, but many people still rely on the service which is already piss poor throughout many rural parts of the north.

Further 'Rationalisation' Planned at Translink

Translink has requested 75 voluntary redundancies across the company, to meet the 'efficiencies' required by the recession. 50 jobs are to go among bus staff and 25 from railway staff. In NIR redundancies are being sought mainly among customer services staff (conductors, station staff, clerical staff etc.). Operational staff (drivers, signallers, driver assessors, for example) are not included at this stage, but a 'freeze' on recruitment is in effect. Recruitment in customer service staff, especially conductors, mushroomed over the last 2-3 years. Now cut-backs are being sought, but what the company will do if it doesn't get the required number of volunteers is unknown.

An 18th March meeting between local ministers, management and Union officials, saw a joint statement issued in which Peter Bunting, the Assistant General Secretary of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU), other union officials and Minister Murphy welcomed the assurances that job losses would be kept to a minimum with no compulsory redundancies.

Rumoured cuts to lesser-used late night and weekend railway services have yet to materialise, although conductors working these services are being asked to provide counts of passenger numbers. Despite the cuts, NIR have recently signed a contract for 20 new trains, due to enter service in 2011. These will replace 13 older trains, giving a net gain of 7 units, which will in turn increase service provision and passenger carrying capacity. Of course, this will create work, but who will this work fall to? It is only a few years since NIR was forced to scrap a timetable when it became clear that the level of train crew overtime required to operate it was simply unfeasible - one of the factors that led to the biggest recruitment drive for drivers and conductors for decades. Now it seems the good times are over and the workers are paying the price.