

Jobcentre Plus call centre strike

WE ARE NOT NUMBERS!

JANE AITCHISON, Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) PCS president, explains why PCS members are striking in all Jobcentre Plus call centres on 18 April.

The PCS civil servants union DWP group executive met last week and called a strike for Monday 18 April. We want to maximise the pressure on management and force them to make the changes our members and our claimants need.

After the very strong strike mandate given to us by 7,000 Jobcentre Plus contact centre workers, PCS tried talking to management but so far they have been unwilling to offer the sort of changes our members are now demanding.

This strike follows a very strongly supported strike in January by members in our seven newest contact centres. They were very angry about their new working conditions when the offices became contact centres and the poor levels of customer service they were forced to give in this job.

The dispute has now escalated to all 7,000 Jobcentre Plus contact centre workers – with all members demanding to be involved in the fight for decent working conditions and better customer service.

Standard industry call centre practices are an anathema to trade unionists and a shock to trade unionised workers. In DWP we have

fought hard for decent working practices and for staff and claimants to be treated with respect.

When management introduced contact centres into Jobcentre Plus they brought in technology that monitors staff every minute of the day. Members are constantly timed and pulled up every time they exceed a target time, even if it is only by a few seconds. They are even timed when they go to the toilet. It is incredibly “Big Brother” and degrading and it has to stop.

These are the type of draconian practices Victorian bosses introduced in their ‘dark satanic mills,’ with their systems of overseers and over lookers. Accepting these practices turns the clock back decades for the dignity and rights of workers. We must end it.

All of the targets in the call centres are about time and getting the claimant off the phone as quickly as possible. People who ring Jobcentre Plus don’t ring for fun – they either ring because they need help getting a job or with getting the benefit money they rely on to live.

They need to have their query dealt with properly – no matter how long it takes. Often claimants have



On a Sheffield picket line in January

nowhere else to turn and are pretty desperate. With 2.5 million unemployed people relying on this service – it is critical that we get it right.

We are not numbers and neither are the unemployed. This strike is about fighting for workers and the unemployed to be treated with respect.

We have already received massive support for this dispute – as soon as

the strike was called we started getting messages of support. During our strike in January we had loads of support from other call centre workers in the private sector – pleased that someone was standing up for them – enthused to get more organised and unionised.

We also got messages of support from other public sector workers pleased that we were taking a stand

against the kind of terms and conditions squeeze they were feeling because of the cuts. Everyone supports this strike because everyone wants to know that if they had to ring the Jobcentre they would get a good service and nobody thinks that anyone should be timed when they go to the toilet.

Support the strike. Together we are stronger. Together we will win.

What we stand for

The Socialist Party fights for socialist change – a democratic society run for the needs of all and not the profits of a few. We also fight, in our day-to-day campaigning, for every possible improvement for working-class people.

As capitalism dominates the globe, the struggle for genuine socialism must be international.

The Socialist Party is part of the Committee for a Workers’ International (CWI), a democratic, socialist international that organises in over 40 countries.

Our demands include:

Work and income

- Trade union struggle to increase the minimum wage to £8 an hour without exemptions as an immediate step towards £10 an hour. For an annual increase in the minimum wage linked to average earnings.
- All workers, including part-timers, temps, casual and migrant workers to have trade union rates of pay, employment protection, and sickness and holiday rights from day one of employment.
- An immediate 50% increase in the state

retirement pension, as a step towards a living pension. Reinstate the link with average earnings now.

- Reject ‘Welfare to Work’. For the right to decent benefits, education, training, or a job, without compulsion.
- Scrap the anti-trade union laws! For fighting trade unions, democratically controlled by their members. Full-time union officials to be regularly elected and receive no more than a worker’s wage.
- A maximum 35-hour week with no loss of pay.

Public services

- No to privatisation and the Private Finance Initiative (PFI). Renationalise all privatised utilities and services, with compensation paid only on the basis of proven need.
- Fully fund all services and run them under accountable, democratic committees that include representatives of service workers and users.
- Free, publicly run, good quality education, available to all at any age. Abolish university tuition fees now and introduce a living grant. No to academies!
- A socialist NHS to provide for everyone’s health needs – free at the point of use and under

democratic control. Kick out private contractors!

- Keep council housing publicly owned. For a massive building programme of publicly owned housing, on an environmentally sustainable basis, to provide good quality homes with low rents.

Environment

- Major research and investment into replacing fossil fuels with renewable energy and into ending the problems of early obsolescence and unrecycled waste.
- Public ownership of the energy generating industries. No to nuclear power. No to Trident.
- A democratically planned, low fare, publicly-owned transport system, as part of an overall plan against environmental pollution.

Rights

- Oppose discrimination on the grounds of race, sex, disability, sexuality, age, and all other forms of prejudice.
- Repeal all laws that trample over civil liberties. For the right to protest! End police harassment.
- Defend abortion rights. For a woman’s right to choose when and whether to have children.
- For the right to asylum. No to racist immigration laws.

New workers’ party

- For a new mass workers’ party drawing together workers, young people and activists from workplace, community, environmental and anti-war campaigns, to provide a fighting, political alternative to the pro-big business parties.
- Trade unions to disaffiliate from the Labour Party now and aid the building of a new workers’ party!

Socialism and internationalism

- No to imperialist wars and occupations. Withdraw the troops immediately from Iraq and Afghanistan!
- Tax the super-rich! For a socialist government to take into public ownership the top 150 companies and banks that dominate the British economy, and run them under democratic working-class control and management. Compensation to be paid only on the basis of proven need.
- A democratic socialist plan of production based on the interests of the overwhelming majority of people, and in a way that safeguards the environment.
- No to the bosses’ neo-liberal European Union! For a socialist Europe and a socialist world!