

PCS wins ballot in Jobcentre Plus contact centres

Katrine Williams
PCS DWP group vice president

70% of Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union members have voted 'yes' to support strike action to improve working conditions in Jobcentre Plus contact centres across the UK. This was in the face of wide-scale intimidation from management trying to frighten members to vote 'no'.

Many managers told their teams that a 'yes' vote could make office closures more likely. Yet Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) management are considering office closures as part of the Con-Dem government's 26% cuts in funding for the department, not because PCS has run a strike ballot. And PCS members were rightly incensed at this attack on the union.

Our members gave solid support for a two-day strike in January in seven of these offices which have been compulsorily moved from being benefit processing centres into contact centres. This showed the determination of our members to fight for better working conditions and crucially the ability to provide good quality services to the public.

Management has failed to take notice of this strength of feeling about the need to improve the way that we deliver services. So we have escalated the dispute to the whole contact centre network.



Striking in January photo Yorkshire SP

PCS members are angry that management believe that the only way to ensure we do our job is by monitoring us for every minute of the day, including trying to restrict us to 12 minutes a day to go to the toilet!

We are threatened with disciplinary action if we consistently spend over the strictly limited target time on calls. This is despite the fact that we are speaking to individuals who are very worried and stressed and need our support.

Our members worked flat out during the recession to deliver services

to the soaring levels of unemployed. We did this without needing constant monitoring. The way the job is designed in Jobcentre Plus contact centres is extremely frustrating and soul-destroying for our members. This contributes, along with the heavy handed management style, to the highest levels of sickness absence in the DWP.

Jobcentre Plus has the largest contact centre network in Europe so we should be leading the way in contact centre job design and services. Especially as we do not sell products

but are delivering vital services to some of the most vulnerable people in society.

Instead our management are trailing behind with their archaic obsession with targets and pressuring our members. They just look at targets for numbers of calls answered and the length of time we spend on each call. Our members recognise clearly that the public, when they get through to us on the phone, want their query dealt with. People do not want to be fobbed off nor to have to wait up to three hours for one of our hard-pressed benefit processing colleagues to ring them back.

We know that the benefit system is difficult to navigate and we want to make sure that advice and guidance is as simple to access as possible. In many instances it would take us less time to resolve the problem with a benefit claim on the phone. But instead we have to write an explanation in an email referral for yet another Jobcentre Plus member to deal with.

Unemployment is now at the highest level since 1994. So it is even more important to PCS that the public get the quality services they deserve and that management allow us to use our judgement and skills to help the public access Jobcentre Plus services.

Our group executive meets this week to discuss our campaign and next steps.

in brief

Unite elections

Ballot papers to elect a new executive committee for Unite have now been sent out and must be returned by 15 April to be counted. Socialist Party members in the union are supporting the United Left candidates; the full slate can be found at www.unitedleft.org.uk. Following the victory of Len McCluskey for general secretary, a left executive with a fighting programme is crucial for members facing attacks on their jobs and conditions.



BA strike ballot

In the fourth strike ballot in four years, BA cabin crew have voted overwhelmingly to strike against management attacks. On a 72% turnout, 5,811 voted to strike, with 1,170 voting against.

This was a re-run of a ballot held before Christmas which was declared invalid through the anti-trade union laws.

The original dispute, which started in November 2009, was over management cutting jobs and attacking working conditions. Workers are angry at travel concessions being removed from staff who went on strike and disciplinary action being taken against union members.

Talks are proceeding between the Unite union and BA. Unite has 28 days to name the dates for strike action.



Unison health conference

Time for action to defend our jobs, pensions and the NHS!

Adrian O'Malley
Conference delegate, personal capacity

Unison health conference is meeting just a week after the magnificent TUC demonstration in London on 26 March. The vast numbers attending the march showed the determination of working people to defend their public services from the cost cutting, privatising policies of the Con-Dem government.

The speakers at the rally in Hyde Park, including Unison general secretary Dave Prentis warned the government that the march was "just the start" of a mass campaign of opposition to the government. Unison health conference is Unison health activists' chance to lay out our plans for a militant campaign of action to defend the NHS.

The Con-Dems are intent on attacking us on every front. Tens of thousands of jobs are at

risk due to so-called 'efficiency savings', and the abolition of Primary Care Trusts and Strategic Health Authorities.

This is a result of billions of pounds of 'efficiency savings' initiated by the previous Labour government and carried on with a vengeance by the Con-Dem coalition.

The government will face enormous opposition from NHS workers, trade unions, and the wider community in trying to implement their programme of cuts and privatisation. Unison must be at the forefront of a campaign of opposition to the government.

The massive mobilisation of health workers for the TUC demo on 26 March showed the desire of our members to resist the Con-Dem attacks. The march and this conference need to be steps towards a one-day public sector general strike in opposition to all cuts and privatisation.

The Tories may pretend to ignore the marchers in London and the massive support for the

demo they had from ordinary Londoners but they could not ignore strike action by millions of public sector workers. The time for talking is over. Now is the time for strike action.

Socialist Party Unison health conference meeting

How to Fight the Cuts

Tuesday 5 April 6.30pm.
Friends Meeting House,
School Lane, Hanover Street,
Liverpool L1 3BT.

Vote for a fighting democratic Unison leadership

Unison members, along with all other workers in both public and private sectors, are facing unprecedented attacks from the Con-Dem government, local councils and employers.

The elections for Unison's National Executive Council run from 11 April to 13 May, when members will have a chance to vote for candidates pledged to turn Unison into a fighting, democratic union.

Unison needs a strategy to defeat all cuts, whoever proposes them. Labour councils who pass on Tory cuts by slashing jobs and services are part of the problem, not the answer. Council workers being sacked by Labour councils will be horrified that Unison continues to pump £3

million a year into the Labour Party on their behalf.

Members in areas across the UK have shown a willingness to fight the attacks but each branch is being left to fight alone; there is no linking of the disputes.

The majority of Unison's current national executive have either no intention of leading a fightback or don't know how to develop a winnable strategy and organise. We need a big influx of new blood - activists with a proven track record of defending members and organising to win.

All local government members could have voted for: Glenn Kelly in the local government male seat.

But Glenn is one of the four Socialist Party members being witch-hunted for challenging the Unison leadership. He has been banned from standing in the NEC elections. This is another indication of the undemocratic methods of the leadership, despite the four winning an Employment Tribunal against the witch-hunt. Now the union leadership will spend thousands of pounds taking the case to an Employment Appeals Tribunal.

Glenn's ban from standing will be challenged. But if Glenn is not on the ballot paper we call on Unison members to vote for Paul Couchman.

All health care members can vote

for: Len Hockey health care service group (SG) male seat, John Malcolm health care SG general seat.

All members can vote for: April Ashley black members female seat, Hugo Pierre black members male seat, Kieran Grogan national young members seat.

The following candidates are standing for regional seats: Jean Thorpe East Midlands female seat, Hannah Walter Northern female seat, Roger Bannister North West male seat, Mike Forster Yorkshire and Humberside general seat, Angie Waller Yorkshire and Humberside female seat, Victoria Perrin Yorkshire and Humberside reserved seat.

Royal Mail closures

Between 500 and 600 postal workers from around Britain met at Friends meeting house in central London on 29 March. They were meeting to discuss Royal Mail management's attacks on the postal service through their new business plan. This means mail centre closures, privatisation and more attacks on postal workers' pensions.

Mail centres around the country are threatened with closure. In Yorkshire and the north east of England, six out of nine mail centres are set to be closed. In London Twelvetees and Nine Elms mail centres will be closed and the remaining centre at Mount Pleasant will see big staff cuts.

These closures and cuts will mean compulsory redundancies, which goes against the national agreement. The Communication Workers Union leadership are giving Royal Mail management until the end of April to come up with concessions before deciding what further action to take.

Pete Redfarm