

# PCS Voice

The newsletter for PCS members in the DWP

## Contents

Bishop Auckland saved	2
Workplace safety	3
Eastern Avenue campaign	4
Employee deal implementation	6
Pay	7
PCS DWP annual conference	8

## Editorial



Following the PCS election process we now have a strong NEC and GEC in place in order to take

members' issues forward in the coming year. This edition of Voice deals with the events of the annual DWP group conference held in Brighton in May.

### Uncertainty

As I write this following the general election the UK political scene is in turmoil; what we once thought was certain is now completely uncertain with the Conservatives failing to win a majority. PCS is at the forefront of campaigning for members rights. On 15 June Mark Serwotka wrote to Theresa May to urge her to bring an immediate end to the 1% pay cap ahead of the queen's speech on 21 June.

PCS continues to navigate through the rough political arena in order to ensure that whatever the political situation may be nationally and internationally, we do the very best for you.

We need a strong PCS presence in every workplace with high density of membership and as many reps and advocates as possible. If you sit next to a non-member, recruit them. If you haven't got a rep, become one or at least an advocate.

The tragic events which have happened over the last months including the attacks in London and Manchester and the Grenfell Tower fire have had a major impact on our society. Our heartfelt sympathy and solidarity goes out to the families and communities affected.

PCS is your certainty, keep it strong.

**Rachael Watts, Editor**

# Office closure campaign continues



PCS utterly condemns the announcement from DWP on 5 July that it will go ahead with its programme to decimate the DWP estate by closing large numbers of DWP offices by March 2018. Of the proposed closures announced in January just a small number have been spared the axe.

While we welcome the handful of decisions not to close sites, it is clear that DWP intends to force through the vast majority putting our members' jobs at risk and devastating the jobcentre network and services we provide.

The GEC is determined to work with branches and members to continue to fight these closures. Already members in Sheffield have taken 11 days of action against the closures and the GEC will work with all branches, and members, who want to fight to retain

their offices.

We will be maximising the political pressure on the government to think again about these closures. We know that many MPs support our campaign to keep the offices open and with the government already weak following the general election, we will seek to exert even more pressure using any means necessary. The GEC is determined to continue to challenge these office closures and will work with branches in the weeks ahead to co-ordinate our response.

The PCS Fighting Fund supports members taking targeted industrial action.

In order to support members taking targeted action we need to ensure that we can exert significant pressure on the government to enter into negotiations over the key issues in our disputes including:

- Pay
- Pensions
- Jobs
- Terms and conditions
- Privatisation.

### Our strategy

Sustained targeted industrial action has proved a successful tool in trade union disputes throughout history, but has to be funded to ensure members involved are not left in poverty.

Encourage your colleagues to back the fighting fund and, if they haven't already, to join PCS.

We are asking all members to make a voluntary donation of £2 a month. Making this small donation could help make major gains for all members on pay, pensions, jobs and terms and conditions. To find out more go to [pcs.org.uk/ff](http://pcs.org.uk/ff). Further articles in this issue cover the action being taken and the PCS campaign.



## In brief

### INDUCTIONS ARE ESSENTIAL

DWP headcount is increasing and thousands of new recruits and apprentices are entering the department. It is critical that PCS engage in all Induction events via the employer and ensure we are made aware of where new staff are expected. All branches need to make arrangements to attend and give a presentation about joining our union. Resources have been sent to branches and there is a dedicated induction and recruitment tab on the DWP page of the website. Branches needing advice with inductions should contact their regional officers or DWP group office for support.

### FINAL CONFERENCE

DWP conference ended with Christine Cuthbert giving the speech of thanks at her final conference as a member of the group executive committee. Chris was a much-valued member of the GEC and has acted as group equality officer and finally as one of the group assistant secretaries. She has provided advice and support to many new members of the GEC and reps throughout the group. The GEC would like to thank and extend appreciation to Chris for all her hard work over the years and wish her all the best and a happy 'partial' retirement.

### PCS MEMBER AGED 27 AND UNDER?

Want to help build and develop young members and the PCS young members' network? Nominate yourself for the annual seminar which sets the agenda for our young members' network. The seminar at the Novotel Hotel in Leeds on 16–17 September, will seek to foster closer working with the national, regional and group young members' networks and advisory committees and will integrate the PCS national campaign and organising priorities of the union with the particular challenges faced by young activists. A variety of speakers, workshops, discussion group sessions and panel debates will be spread across the weekend.

# Bishop Auckland saved

Following the announcement of the DWP office closures on 5 July 2017 and the announcement that Bishop Auckland office was staying open it was fantastic to hear from Gordon Mabon, DWP County Durham.

"Members here are on cloud nine. It's interesting to hear staff say that they can now book a holiday or buy a new car and in one case even order a new kitchen, with other staff saying that they had been cutting back on meals out and social activities since January to put money to one side in order to start saving to pay for the extra travel costs should the office have closed.

"I don't think we can ever underestimate the impact of our campaign on the decision to keep the office open and how we have made a difference to the lives of the 83 staff who work here and live in the local community.

### Successful campaign

"I feel that this is an opportune moment to pass on



our thanks to Steve Swainston, GEC and Simon Elliot, PCS staff, for their unstinting support in recent months. They have supported the branch in every aspect of our campaign and without both of them we would not have achieved such a successful result for the member's here. They both helped to mobilise support across the region and nationally; not only in PCS but

across the trade union movement and we as a branch will forever be grateful for this.

It's resulted also in our membership here going from 35 to 70 in an office of 83 and this has only been achieved not just through hard work but also showing staff that we can make a difference.

This proves that when we work together we can be as effective as ever.

## Fran Heathcote, group president



I was delighted to be re-elected as PCS DWP President in May, as well as being elected for the

first time as national vice president. Thanks to all members who participated in the elections and I promise that PCS will work tirelessly on behalf of members in the year ahead.

As I write this, the government is in turmoil after the general election and in the aftermath of recent horrific terror attacks and the avoidable tragedy at Grenfell Tower.

The queen's speech continues to demonstrate how out of touch the government really is with lives of ordinary people. In refusing to end the public sector pay cap the Tories are yet again showing their contempt for

public servants at a time when even the ex-head of civil service, Sir Bob Kerslake, had taken to Civil Service World stating the public sector pay cap cannot continue.

Despite the Government's stance on pay, PCS are clear that DWP should negotiate fully with PCS to give ALL members the pay rise that they deserve. Many DWP members received a below inflation increase this year and DWP must address this, not just hide behind the government cap.

On office closures, the already troubled People and Locations Programme looks even more uncertain; our members at Sheffield Eastern Avenue continued the campaign to keep their office open with a second week of excellent strike action, supported by the public and claimant groups. I was proud to

chair the strike rally on Monday 12th June and hear from a number of speakers, including PCS general secretary Mark Serwotka. Shadow chancellor, John McDonnell, sent a welcome message of support to our members.

Members at Whitley Bay jobcentre have voted unanimously for strike action, and strike submissions are being made at two other sites also facing closure. As the full impact on the public and our members becomes increasingly clear and the opposition to the DWP plans continues to grow, the Government is not in a strong position to press ahead with these closures in the face of so much opposition.

This government has no mandate for the cuts it is trying to drive through.

**Fran Heathcote, president**



# Office closure and Eastern Avenue jobcentre campaign

## Group conference debates office closures

An ongoing concern at this year's conference was the issue of the office closure programme. Following on from the motion carried at last year's conference we now know much more about the planned office closures. By March 2018, 78 out of 714 Jobcentres are to close with work and staff transferring to the nearest jobcentres.

- A further 80 jobcentres to be co-located with local authority premises
- 30 back of house operational closures. This is out of 150 back of house operations sites that currently exist now – CMG, sites, pension centres, benefit processing sites and contact centres
- Corporate centre hubs to be limited to six, with two current corporate centres sites closing
- Transitional sites will be affected with a further 40 back of house operational sites have been labelled transitional sites which means their future is only secure for the next three years, or five years for six of the 40 sites.

## Opposition

This year delegates carried motion A70 calling on the GEC to continue to oppose the office closures, where our members or the public are adversely affected, and to mount a campaign of opposition to these attacks on our members and on the services that we provide, to include considering the use of industrial action, in full consultation with regions and branches.

Conference was deeply concerned about the effect on PCS members and on the service we provide to the most vulnerable people in society. Members continue to condemn DWP for failing to consult those who use our services in order to force these proposals through



and commit to do all we can to expose these plans for the cost-cutting measure that they are.

**Liz McGaghey**, Glasgow branch commented on the excellent campaign in Glasgow where 50% of the jobcentres were due to close: 'Consultation has ended, both on the Glasgow sites and on the rest of the estate, however the campaign does not end there. We need to ensure there are no compulsory redundancies or relocations and we must oppose closures with a detrimental affect on our members and the community.'

Essex branch speaker **Stacia Hills** said: 'Our contact centre is a transitional site and this has left members unsure of what their future is. Sites in the local area will not have the capacity to take in staff and already have issues with space.'

With unwavering support the motion was carried by conference.

In light of the announcements, EM14 was submitted to conference to call on the GEC to support the

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industrial action balloted for by members at Eastern Avenue Jobcentre in Sheffield called in opposition to the announced closure.

**Angela Grant** spoke on behalf of the GEC seconding the motion and stating that: 'This attack on our jobcentres will leave our sick, disabled, vulnerable and unemployed in our communities struggling to travel great distances to receive help.' She went on to say 'Here in DWP, our whole reason for being is to provide a service. We must remember that the jobcentres we work in are not ours to lose and we must strive to save every office, in every community where there is a necessity to provide that service.' The motion was carried

unanimously.

**Fran Heathcote reviews the Eastern Avenue campaign so far...**

PCS members at Eastern Avenue jobcentre in Sheffield took part in two week-long strikes in June and July, protesting against the Department for Work and Pensions' proposals to close the site. The action received fantastic support, with about 50 members out on strike, and excellent support from the public and local community groups.

Members were out in force on the picket line outside the Eastern Avenue jobcentre every day, protesting against its proposed closure and the removal of the vital services that it provides to the public.

The picket line was visited each day by members of other local PCS branches, associate and retired (ARMs) members, DWP group executive members and PCS national executive committee members. Disabled People Against the Cuts, representatives of other unions and members of the local community, who will be

Continued from page 4

affected by the closure of the centre, also attended to show solidarity and protest against the closure.

Alistair Tice, of Unite Community, visited the picket line on the fourth day of the strike on Thursday. He said: "These workers are not striking for more money, not even for their own jobs, but to keep a local service open to one of most deprived areas in Sheffield."

On the last day of this week's action, members of the picket line were given moral support in the form of cakes from a Sheffield branch executive member, which helped warm the spirits of members on a chilly morning.

A successful public meeting was held at the Manor Estates Social Club on Monday 13 June to promote the strike and outline the importance of keeping the vital services the jobcentre provides within the community.

As well as a large number of striking PCS members, members of the public who use the services of the jobcentre also attended the meeting.

The meeting was chaired by DWP group president Fran Heathcote, and was addressed by a number of speakers.

Clare Goonan, a PCS rep who is on strike, thanked members for the solidarity they had shown. Julie Dore, leader of Sheffield City Council, said the campaign had the full backing of the council and she also read out a message of support from



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local Labour MP Louise Haigh.

Jen Jones, from campaign group Disabled People Against Cuts, gave a moving speech, praising the support she had received from our

members who work at Eastern Avenue, demonstrating why it was so important to maintain local services that are accessible to all.

#### Defending public services

PCS general secretary, Mark Serwotka, outlined the importance of defending public services and said that the chances of a successful campaign to keep the office open were dramatically improved by the current, rapidly changing political landscape. He promised the full support of the union for the ongoing campaign.

Mark said that he had been in contact with Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn about the dispute, and expected the issue to be raised in parliament. He also read out a text from the shadow chancellor, John McDonnell, offering apologies for not being able to attend the meeting and saying: "I send my solidarity to you in support of the action you are taking. The DWP has forced through this office closure programme with no consideration for either the service or the staff. You have my support."

Other unions and the Derbyshire Unemployed Workers' Centre gave their solidarity from the floor of the meeting, and striking members were buoyed by the support that they were shown.

#### Keeping up the pressure

DWP planned to start announcing closures straight after the general election in early June, but the uncertainty facing the minority Tory government meant that no announcements were made until had briefed the new minister.

PCS DWP president, Fran Heathcote, wrote to DWP stating "PCS calls upon the department to withdraw the programme of office closures in DWP at the earliest opportunity."

DWP eventually announced its decisions on 5th July to widespread derision from across the political landscape.

PCS feels strongly that these proposals are ill-thought out, risk compulsory redundancies for our members, leading to a worse service for those in receipt of benefits and do not save money. We demand that DWP withdraw their plans. Fran said "It is our view that the incoming government does not have a mandate for the extremely controversial and damaging plan to close 70 jobcentre (one in ten) and 22 back of house offices by March 2018. PCS will continue to support the fight to defend services in Sheffield, Whitley Bay and elsewhere. We demand that the government now ends these plans."



# Employee deal implementation

The employee deal once again took centre stage at this year's DWP group conference with a number of motions submitted by branches, as well as the GEC, looking at both the implementation issues members were facing, and the pay aspects of the deal.

Following a serious debate conference overwhelmingly backed the need to ensure the collective agreement was implemented fully, while recognising the need to address a number of issues which operations managers were unnecessarily creating with their "interpretation" of the deal, and urged the incoming GEC to continuing pressing on the outstanding pay issues, such as 0.25% for those opted out and the impact of increased rates of inflation. Conference clearly rejected the idea that the collective agreement should be "ripped up", and instead highlighted branches' determination to use the agreement to support members and challenge poor decisions.

## Implementation not happening as it should

Since conference the GEC has been working overtime in addressing a number of concerns, raised by members and branches, as to how the deal is being implemented on the ground, ensuring bad practices and bad decisions are challenged at every level by PCS.

Both branches and members have referred a number of problems with the planning round for 'rotation 2', due to start in September, to group office. These include a number of WSD districts refusing to implement "tent poles" across the district rather than at a lower level, despite agreement between PCS and DWP; staff being told they must agree to do 6.30 finishes, even if they are already covered by team preference; a complete lack of team discussion to try and fill any gaps in cover; attempts to force opted out staff to work their contracted working hours rather than flexi, including working to 5pm every day;

**“We must continue using the collective agreement, signed only last year, to protect our members against overzealous managers and ensure the terms of the agreement are implemented in full”**  
Martin Cavanagh

imposing 5pm and late finishes on staff covered by the safeguards in paragraph 13 of the agreement; threats of disciplinary action against members if they do not change

their working pattern preferences; and part-time staff being told they must hit a tent pole each day, against the agreement reached with DWP.

All of these issues and a number of others have been raised with the employer and DWP has agreed to work with PCS to resolve these problems, wherever they exist. Group president, Fran Heathcote, has also compiled a spreadsheet with each issue raised with group office, and has sent this on to DWP to aid this process.

Martin Cavanagh, group vice-president, who spoke on behalf of the GEC at conference in the debate, is clear "we must continue using the collective agreement, signed only last year, to protect our members against overzealous managers and ensure the terms of the agreement are implemented in full. The only opt-out contained within the deal was for individuals choosing to reject the new contract, not for elements within DWP to opt out of implementing the agreement."

## DWP PCS rep wins ULR award

PCS DWP rep Ashraf Haji from DWP Leicestershire branch won the award for supporting older workers at the 2017 Union Learning Reps (ULR) awards. Ashraf told us how being a ULR has helped his members: "When I first became a ULR there were few learning activities going on in the branch. Learning at work week was a very small event. I attended various courses, seminars and forums in the first couple of years where I gained valuable knowledge and experience to become a winning ULR supporting older workers, not to mention a large percentage of those to whom English is a second language.

I am always helping, guiding



and mentoring members on the day-to-day learning on the system applications, Mandatory e-learning,

Microsoft Office and DSE. It was a great honour and privilege to attend the ULR conference at Congress House

in London and be presented with the award for ULR of the year 2017 supporting older workers."

# Pay is still an issue

PCS is committed to using the review mechanism, contained within the employee deal agreement, to improve those elements of pay which still need addressing for members.

Conference passed a motion that called for an early meeting with DWP to attempt to resolve the outstanding issues, including using the review mechanism to seek to increase the pay on offer to those staff who opted out of the employee deal and work in special location pay zone. We want DWP to honour its commitment to ensure staff who claim EWSA are not financially worse off after the withdrawal of the allowance in July 2019, and we want DWP to review the amounts paid to members who have accepted the ED terms, in light of any significant rise in inflation.

PCS has been unable to convince the department at this stage to increase the payments for those opted out, in SLPZ sites or in light of inflation (which at the time of writing stands at 2.9%). DWP has cited the continuing government public sector pay cap and lack of Treasury authority for extra flexibility, as the reason for not addressing these issues now.

The GEC believes this is short-sighted in the current political climate, with a weak government firmly on the back foot, and calls from a number of quarters for an end to austerity measures, including pay restraint in the public sector.

While it is disappointing that the employer has not been budged at this stage, we will press at every opportunity to end the restraint placed on our members. In particular those who have received only 0.25%, as they chose to protect their existing contract, will be a focal point for future discussion.

Martin Cavanagh highlighted that pay is still very much an issue for PCS members in DWP. He said: "Many of our members in DWP received significant



**“Members in DWP have suffered pay restraint for the past decade, and will continue to do so under current plans. It is therefore vitally important that our members are very much part of the national union’s campaign to scrap the government imposed pay cap**

increases in pay as a result of the employer deal agreement last year. We should not underestimate the impact awards, for many of our members, in excess of 15% over four years, has on members lives. Or indeed the return of pay progression allowing all who accepted the ED terms to reach the new spot rate by July 2019. This is hugely important to members after decades of pay restraint and restrictions to up the pay scales.

“That said the department’s use of the ongoing pay cap as a

reason not to address pay for those in receipt of lower awards, especially those who opted out, shows austerity is still inflicting misery on our members and the union’s national campaign to end this attack on our low paid members is as relevant as ever.

“We must, and will, continue our campaign until we achieve a proper pay increase for all our members. The signing of the agreement on Employee Deal does not diminish that objective in any way.”

#### Political context

In the wake of the general election result PCS argued that DWP should and delay the 2017 review of the Employee Deal given the intense speculation that the public sector pay cap may be relaxed. This led to a telekit with the Permanent Secretary where he said it was not within his gift to ignore current government pay policy. Accordingly he refused to delay the pay award in July salaries. He did however give PCS a strong assurance that, if and when civil service pay policy is relaxed, he will seek to secure improved settlements for DWP staff without waiting until 2018.

#### Campaign to continue

While it has not been possible in 2017 to improve on the gains that were made in the employee deal, the PCS DWP GEC remains committed to campaigning for a decent pay rise for all of our members, and opposing the totally discredited pay cap.

PCS is clear that DWP should not be making pay awards that are still limited by the restraint and will work with national PCS colleagues, and other unions, to play our part in increased campaigning activity.

Members in DWP have suffered pay restraint for the past decade, and will continue to do so under current plans. It is therefore vitally important that our members are very much part of the national union’s campaign to scrap the government imposed pay cap.

We would urge every member of PCS, of every grade, to join in that activity in the weeks and months ahead, and play a full role in toppling a pay cap that sees our members fall further behind other sectors with every passing year.

# PCS DWP annual conference

Trainee and first time delegate feedback



Every year both DWP and national group conferences offer branches the opportunity to send branch representatives to attend conference. This can either be as a branch delegate or as a trainee delegate. We got in touch with trainee and first-time delegates to DWP conference and got their feedback: "Having been a PCS rep for over five years I finally got round to putting myself forward to attend conference this year. I attended both group (as a delegate) and national conferences. For the national one I was lucky to obtain trainee delegate status.

"I must admit to feeling slightly nervous as the delegation pack arrived from PCS and the week drew closer – not least as I am visually impaired and had my guide dog to consider as well. However, with great support from my branch, other reps and the tutors for the national conference, I now have a much greater understanding of the union and how motions are written and passed. I even spoke at the DWP group in support of a motion – (with Elki my guide dog proudly looking on).

If you have any interest in

the union and how it works I would recommend applying to be a trainee delegate or standing as a delegate for conference to represent your branch at your AGM. I have made loads of new friends and contacts."

**Marcus Chapman, DWP Northamptonshire**

"I really enjoyed my experience and would love to go back as a full delegate in the future. Even if I don't have the opportunity to go again, I learned a lot about how democracy in PCS works and it's given me more confidence as a PCS representative. Because of my health problems, I was rather nervous that I wouldn't cope but Marie McDonough, group organiser and the other organisers who were there were very understanding and helped me to take part. I would thoroughly encourage anyone to apply."

**Michelle Howlett, DWP Nottingham**

I attended conference for the first time as a trainee delegate. I found it fascinating. From the moment I arrived there were things going on, there was no time to be bored. The support we received from the delegates, standing orders committee and members of the GEC was fabulous, nothing was too much trouble. It was interesting and fun. Hoping to return next year.

**Danielle Harvey, North Notts branch**

## Get in touch

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## PCS Voice online

To link to PCS Voice articles go to [pcs.org.uk/voice](http://pcs.org.uk/voice)



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