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World Refugee Day 2023: A spotlight on our fight against the government's Rwanda policy

This World Refugee Day, we take a look back on the campaign work PCS has done to fight the government's anti-immigration policies and its demonisation of refugees.

This World Refugee Day, we are celebrating our commitment to refugee rights by looking back on the campaign work PCS has done with courageous refugees and other organisations to fight the government's vicious anti-immigration policies and its continued demonisation of refugees.

When our general secretary Mark Serwotka [wrote last year](#) that he is "immensely proud of the work our movement does in fighting for a better and fairer world", he was referring mainly to the inspirational campaign work PCS has done on refugee issues. Trade unions, he rightly insisted, are vehicles for social change.

In 2022, PCS united with campaigning organisations and lawyers to fight the government's immigration policies. Alongside Care4Calais and Channel Rescue, we helped to force the government to withdraw plans to order Border Force staff to turn back boats in the channel.

But our campaigning work on this issue could not stop there. When the government put forward the Rwanda policy - which seeks to relocate asylum seekers to Rwanda where they would be processed for asylum and resettlement - we decided to take a further stand.

Legal challenge

We soon became involved with the legal challenge. Detention Action, Care4Calais, PCS and 8 asylum seekers challenged the plan in the High Court, requesting a last-minute injunction to stop the first flight from taking off on 14

June, 2022.

Although the High Court refused to grant the injunction on the day of the planned flight, the European Court of Human Rights issued an interim measure which stated that 1 of its 7 passengers, an Iraqi man, would face "a real risk of irreversible harm" if he was transported to Rwanda. That interim measure led the other 6 passengers to appeal. The removal orders were scrapped, and the flight was cancelled.

Even though we considered this a win, the High Court of the United Kingdom ruled in December that the government's plan to send asylum seekers to Rwanda while their application is ongoing is lawful. But regardless of the legality of the policy, we decided to continue our fight because the government's policy is morally reprehensible and utterly inhumane. In December we [called](#) on the Home Office to recognise that and abandon it.

It failed to do so, and now an appeal by refugees of the Rwanda judicial review is underway at the Court of Appeal.

On 15 November, we were delighted to see the Supreme Court decision on the Rwanda policy. It upheld the Court of Appeal's ruling that the UK government's plan to send asylum seekers to Rwanda is unlawful.

PCS head of bargaining Paul O'Connor, who has led this campaign on behalf of the union, said that the decision was a "vindication of our position". "PCS has stood to prevent refugees from being subjected to this inhumanity and to protect our members from having to work in an increasingly hostile environment," he said.

PCS now calls on the government to adopt our Safe Passage policy. As PCS General Secretary Mark Serwotka put it, "the only way to protect human life and prevent people from drowning in the Channel is to give them safe passage."

Safe passage

PCS has been at the forefront of this campaign because we want the Home Office to abandon its hostile approach to refugees and to work with us to build a humane system that allows our members the time, space and resources to do their jobs properly; and which prevents our members from having to work in a hostile environment and dangerous conditions.

Earlier this year, PCS and Care4Calais founder Claire Moseley [wrote](#) to the leaders of UK trade unions seeking their support for a Safe Passage policy. In a [pamphlet](#) released last year, Care4Calais and PCS proposed alternative policy solutions to the current dangerous and uncontrolled situation in the Channel.

The pamphlet calls for the implementation of a safe passage visa scheme, to allow refugees to enter the UK safely and begin their asylum claim. This is seen as the best way to prevent hazardous Channel crossings, smash the people smugglers' business operation and, ultimately, save lives.

'Beacon of light'

At our recent conference, a well-attended [fringe meeting on 'Safe passage and the illegal migration mill'](#) heard deputy president Martin Cavanagh call the recent campaigning work that PCS has been doing on these issues as a "beacon of light" for the union.

PCS Head of Bargaining, Paul O'Connor, who has been heading the litigation on behalf of the union, said that the recent work PCS has been doing on these issues serves as an example of "ordinary workers doing extraordinary things".

James Cox, chair of our Home Office group, thanked the union for the support that members of his group have received. "This opens up debate that we haven't had in the Home Office before," he said.

[On the conference floor](#), motion A83 on continuing to defend refugees and A82 were overwhelmingly carried. A82, in particular, instructed the NEC to increase distribution of the Safe Passage pamphlet; campaign for greater investment in the Home Office to ensure that staff can properly determine asylum claims, free from political pressure and interference; campaign for reform of immigration detention centres and a better working environment for staff; and work with Stand Up to Racism and others to counter far-right activity and support local mobilisations.

Seconding the motion for Home Office Croydon, Lou told conference: "We want to work in a humane manner - the safe passage policy will help that".

[Reps and members can read more details about the campaign on PCS Knowledge \(login required\).](#)