

6 November 2023

Mark Serwotka: "PCS is in a great place for the future"

In an interview with PCS People, Mark talks about his 23-year journey as leader of our union, which has seen PCS – and Mark himself – overcome more odds-defying battles than you could shake a placard at.

Did you imagine you'd still be in this job in 2023? No. I was elected at 37 and the last thing on my mind was being here 23 years later. When I stood, I was working part-time in the DHSS (now DWP). I'd been an activist for 20 years but no one, including those running my campaign, thought victory was likely. So winning was a shock. I started on that Monday, having never been on the executive or to the TUC, and knowing hardly anyone in the building.

What are your stand-out memories from the early days? There were a lot of internal problems, but in the wider union the mood was quite euphoric because it had taken a massive effort to get me elected. At first I had to work alongside Barry Reamsbottom who was joint general secretary [due to PCS being formed from a merger in 1999]. As many will remember, after the first year the executive that was loyal to him voted to sack me before I started as the sole GS. He called a meeting and said he didn't recognise my election. This led to a huge campaign for democracy in PCS, which was inspiring. It ended with a court victory which ruled my election was valid.

What kind of union did you inherit? It still bore the hallmarks of its predecessor, the CPSA. There was a lack of respect for democracy and the role of lay reps and members – so there wasn't much activity or campaigning, and no serious effort to stand up to the huge attacks the civil service faced. Our focus was the empowerment of lay reps and leaders and resourcing them to do what any union must do to be successful, which is to mobilise its members to participate. We had 240,000 members then, and within two years we'd gone over 300,000.

What were some of the lighter moments in your time as GS? It was a serious time, but one relates to the government's attempt to bankrupt PCS by

removing the ability to collect subs via 'check-off'. We later proved that they'd acted illegally. The DWP (the first of five departments to lose its case) offered us £1 in compensation. I say that's funny, because within weeks we'd got £3million and could publicly thank a Tory minister for the huge contribution to our strike fund. In 2011, I was on Newsnight with the Cabinet Office minister Francis Maude and Jeremy Paxman during the pensions strikes. I called Maude a liar on live TV and the horror on their faces was priceless. And before the London Olympics we called a strike in the Home Office. We were being accused of trying to wreck the games and TV crews were camped outside my house and. I was getting hate mail - someone said they'd written to then London Mayor Boris Johnson demanding that I be publicly executed as part of the opening ceremony. That caused some merriment, I have to say.

And darker moments? When I walked into that executive meeting the year after I'd been elected to see one of Reamsbottom's assistants handing out a paper and somebody shouted, 'I don't know if you've read it yet, but you're sacked', it was chilling. I'd left my job and re-located my family from Sheffield to London - it was very difficult. But arguably it planted the seeds for the union that we are now because we overcame that battle against all the odds. We went on to have our first national strike in a generation, in 2004 (below), and I think that was rooted in the activism that defended my election. And obviously there were dark days with my health. The worst was when I was at my desk in Clapham and my heart pump, which was keeping me alive while I waited for a transplant, developed a clot and started alarming. PCS colleagues drove me to Papworth Hospital in Cambridge with the alarm going off constantly. At any point that clot could have been life-ending. I was in hospital for months after that, waiting for my transplant.

What are your proudest achievements as GS? That we're now truly democratic and member-led. We've faced so many attacks from governments, and still do, but what has kept us strong is that we've made sure members and activists are at the core of it. I said from the start that for any union to be successful it must be based on workplace participation and activity. That mantra is one we've stuck to because you can carry any resolution you like but it achieves nothing if members and reps aren't prepared to mobilise for it. Also the way we responded to the check-off attack. We recruited 170,000 members to paying subs by direct debit in under three months. It was a stunning team effort that showed the best of the union. And there were the battles over pensions. We negotiated with the Labour government following a strike vote, which meant that every year since 2006 we have members who can still take their civil service

pension at 60 – that’s worth hundreds of millions of pounds. Then when the coalition attacked public sector pensions, PCS was pivotal to the massive joint-union fightback in 2011. Today, it’s the legal action we’ve taken on behalf of refugees to stop pushbacks and deportations to Rwanda. I can’t tell you how proud I am and how much good feedback PCS gets on this. We were able to take a bold stand by being unionised in the Border Force and picking up on the concerns of members who objected to what they saw as illegal activity that could risk life. We’ve represented those workers and made alliances to fund legal cases that mean no one has been deported to Rwanda.

How do you see PCS’s future? I’m very optimistic. We are about to elect the first woman GS. The union is financially healthy. We have fantastic staff working in new ways. We’ve recently beaten the anti-union thresholds in national ballots twice. We have recruited significantly thanks to our national campaign and have many brilliant activists. We have found an industrial action strategy that’s for the first time delivered more money from the government across the board. And on those picket lines we saw an influx of younger people and more diversity. All the teamwork people have done over the years has put PCS in a great place. If we elect people who commit to the same ideals – strong in the workplace with active participation – we’ll only get stronger and win more.

What will you do now? I’ve been working for 44 years and had significant health issues. It’ll be the first time in decades that I won’t be looking at emails or being on the phone constantly. So firstly I’m going to relax and really enjoy some time with my family. Then I’ll see what the future brings. I’m still passionate about so many things. I’ll also be re-engaging with my Cardiff City season ticket.