

15 November 2023

The PCS campaign against the government's Rwanda policy

Take a look back at the campaigning PCS has done against the government's demonisation of refugees – a story that started with ordinary members fighting for a more human asylum system and ended with a historic victory in the Supreme Court.

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.

This is about ordinary workers doing extraordinary things.

In autumn 2021, PCS was approached by our members and representatives in our Home Office South-East England branch who had been asked by the then home secretary, Priti Patel, to carry out a dangerous pushbacks manoeuvre on small boats crossing the English Channel.

We then united with [Care4Calais](#) and Channel Rescue to force the government to withdraw these plans to order Border Force staff to turn back boats.

Our members were clear: they were completely opposed to the policy, which they considered unlawful, morally reprehensible and utterly inhumane.

Since then, PCS has been engaged in litigation against the Home Office on behalf of our members who deliver the UK's asylum and immigration system and of vulnerable refugees whom the government seeks to demonise.

Rwanda plan

As well as blocking the government from implementing these dangerous and unlawful pushback manoeuvres, our judicial review proceedings over the Rwanda plan helped to prevent the deportation of eight individual refugees.

Even though we considered these as wins, the High Court of the United Kingdom ruled in December 2022 that the government's plan to send asylum seekers to Rwanda 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. We continued to call on the Home Office to recognise that and abandon it.

It failed to do so, and an application was made by the refugees to the Court of Appeal. The Court of Appeal overturned the High Court verdict and ruled the policy unlawful.

On 15 November, our position and campaign was vindicated when the Supreme Court upheld the Court of Appeal's ruling that the UK government's plan to send asylum seekers to Rwanda is unlawful.

Safe passage

Successive governments have consistently sought to mask their failures by creating a poisonous environment for refugees, fuelling racial hatred in order to divide us from one another.

Yet while their desperation is obvious to most, it is our job as trade unionists to challenge their narrative and create an alternative.

One way PCS has attempted to do this is by producing a joint policy with Care4Calais on safe passage for refugees. A humane alternative to the inhumanity of the Rwanda policy, Safe Passage demands the implementation of a Safe Passage Visa Scheme to allow refugees to enter the UK safely and begin their asylum claim.

It also demands reform of immigration detention centres and greater investment in the Home Office to ensure that staff in the department have the time, space and resources to properly determine asylum claims, free from political pressure and interference.

We continue to call on the government to implement our Safe Passage policy and for all trade unions to support this workable solution to dangerous channel crossings - the only way to prevent tragic deaths in the channel.

'Beacon of light'

At our 2023 annual delegates conference, a well-attended [fringe meeting on 'Safe passage and the illegal migration Bill'](#) 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 led this campaign on behalf of the union, praised the Home Office members who raised and campaigned on this issue as “ordinary workers doing extraordinary things”.

We heard how our campaigning against the government’s anti-refugee policies had opened “up debate that we haven’t had in the Home Office before”.

Members are rightly concerned about their bread-and-butter issues – but they are also keen to develop an alternative vision to the society we currently live in. On the conference floor, a member from 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 \(login required\).](#)