

5 March 2024

HMRC sacks PCS rep in Newcastle

A PCS rep has been sacked, in the aftermath of the strike in Benton Park View, with a second PCS rep facing similar charges. Given Newcastle management have history when it comes to sacking union reps, PCS will be consulting members and PCS Legal.

HMRC management in the department's Benton Park View branch in Newcastle, have sacked Gordon Askew, a member of the branch executive committee, on the grounds of 'potential' computer misuse.

Benton Park View rep sacked

In the aftermath of the recent national campaign strike, which in HMRC took place in Benton Park View and East Kilbride, the department launched an investigation into two Newcastle-based representatives. The charge was one of a 'potential' breach of the department's IT policy; in the case of the already dismissed representative, arising from a Microsoft Teams message sent to a number of members who the branch believed were in scope for the action but were not taking part in the strike. The message asked them if they knew they were in scope, but made it expressly clear that it was solely a decision for the members themselves, as to whether or not they participated in the strike.

The department's decision maker claimed that the 'potential' breach was that Microsoft Teams had been used "without a legitimate business reason".

Leaving aside the issue of 'potential' breach, we understand the decision maker said that they had considered a lesser penalty, but had decided to sack the rep because they thought that the rep didn't seem sorry enough. The decision maker clearly thought that the rep having nearly thirty years of spotless service to the department, didn't carry anywhere as much weight as their own ability to know whether or not someone is apologetic enough.

This isn't the first time that Newcastle management has sacked a member of the PCS Benton Park View branch committee. In 2017, the branch organiser was sacked for emailing the branch membership list from his work email account to

his personal account. We reminded HMRC that a PCS rep emailing PCS material from work to home was not a matter for the department; but they proceeded with the dismissal anyway. In that case, we were successful in securing the rep's reinstatement, but it had become clear that Newcastle management were more than happy to completely ignore data protection rules, in their enthusiasm to sack a PCS representative.

Another rule for the bosses...

Despite the rigid approach they've taken in this case, HMRC seems to have a somewhat flexible interpretation to inappropriate computer use when it comes to its own managers. In the last few months a number of managers had been ignoring HMRC's annual leave carryover policy, and using a system code clearly marked "Not for use in HMRC". As far as we are aware, none of the managers concerned were disciplined for ignoring the policy and inappropriately using the system. In fact, the only people penalised were the junior members of staff, who ended up having their excess carried-over leave retrospectively docked by the department.

In the past we've raised other examples of managers inappropriately using the system to monitor staff; and whenever we've brought this to the department's attention, they simply respond that they will remind the managers concerned about what's appropriate. It's clear yet again, there's one rule for the workers, and another rule for the bosses.

Members' Meeting planned

PCS will be arranging an all-members' meeting shortly, in order to discuss the union's response to the sacking of a rep who has worked for the department for almost thirty years; along with a second potential sacking of another long-serving member of staff. We'll send details of the meeting to your personal email address. Additionally, PCS is discussing how best to take the case forward with our legal department.

We'll keep you fully informed of developments.

Financial support

Our rep has been summarily dismissed without notice, and so has received no money from the department since the date of his dismissal letter. PCS nationally is exploring how we can help and the branch is organising a collection to provide

help in the immediate term. The branch would welcome donations to support Gordon. If you want to help, the branch's campaign bank account details are:

Account name: PCS Inland Revenue NICO No.2 Account

Sort Code: 60-83-01

Account Number: 20070366

The branch is maintaining a detailed record of all donations received.

National Campaign

Benton Park View was one of the two branches where members took targeted action, as part of the national campaign; action which secured additional funding for pay and the £1,500 cost-of-living payment.

Perhaps some elements of HMRC think that PCS will be intimidated by tactics like this. Far from it. Should members taking part in the current consultation support taking forward the next stage of the national campaign, the group executive committee will be looking with renewed rigour, to identify areas of the department for inclusion in any extended, targeted action, that the PCS national leadership agrees to take.