

13 March 2024

ONS strike ballot opens over mandatory return to the office policy.

Management is insisting that the members should be present in the workplace for at least 40% of the working week.

A ballot of PCS members at the Office for National Statistics (ONS) has begun in response to management's insistence that all staff should be physically present in the workplace for at least 40% of their working week.

1,200 members in Newport, Titchfield, London, Darlington, Manchester and Edinburgh are being asked to support strike action and action short of strike. The ballot will close on 2 April.

Until January 2024, there had been no requirement for staff to spend a specific amount of time in offices, following the move to home and hybrid-working at the start of the Covid pandemic. There had been regular reassurances that these arrangements would remain in place and ONS staff followed this model in good faith and built their lives around it.

However late in 2023, workers were told that from January 2024 they would need to spend a minimum of 20% of their time in the workplace, increasing to 40% from April.

PCS maintains that the post-pandemic arrangements at ONS have been an example of best practice in flexible and sustainable ways of working - as reflected in the awards and recognition won by ONS. No evidence-based business case has been made for disrupting this model and, while the planned minimum attendance requirement is lower than the 60% soon to be required by many other civil service employers, the sudden change has caused anger among staff demoralised by the lack of trust and the need for rapid changes to their childcare and other arrangements.

The decision is being rushed through, with management rejecting unions' requests for a delay. Management has suggested that it does not have the flexibility to adopt a less disruptive timescale, even though the Cabinet Office has confirmed that individual bodies do have such freedom and other employers like the Crown Prosecution Service have adopted a more gradual and consensual approach.

PCS is calling for meaningful talks in order to arrive at a sensible way forward that accommodates the legitimate concerns of ONS employees.

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