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Leading a new era for PCS

Fran Heathcote kicked off a new era for PCS when she was elected as our first woman general secretary (GS). Read our interview with her from PCS People.

How does it feel to be in the job?

It's good, yes. It's a bit strange after 24 years of Mark Serwotka, but I feel like I'm settling in and taking each day as it comes. They're big shoes to fill and it's the end of an era. But it's also the start of a new era and it's about doing things in my own style.

Being the first woman GS means there is quite a lot of interest in me at the moment, but the welcome I have had from activists across the union movement shows that, thanks to Mark's leadership, PCS is held in high regard. I am determined for that to continue.

I've come up through the ranks, having started out as a workplace rep, then eventually DWP group president and national president. So, although I'm PCS through and through, it's an adjustment to now be employed by the union, and be responsible for its 200 staff.

Was being GS your long-term goal?

Absolutely none of this has been a master plan.

When I left school I worked with racehorses. It wasn't unionised - I worked 60 hours a week for £60, for the love of it. The horses had a break and I needed a temporary job to tide me over. I went to the jobcentre and, to cut a long story short, they eventually recruited me into the DWP. I joined the union straight away and at my first meeting they were looking for a rep. Somebody pointed at me and said 'she's young and gobby'...

Thirty years later, having never intended to stay, I was still at the DWP. It was the union work that kept me there. It has changed my life really. I didn't plan to be group president, I didn't plan to be president, nor general secretary. But each

time others have encouraged me to go for it, and here we are!

What's at the top of your to-do pile?

It's the national campaign and the decision the NEC took to move to a statutory ballot, which means that we have a lot of work to do to engage members, MPs, and the Cabinet Office around our pay claim demands. We have to get the message out there about why it's so important to pursue the campaign.

Our action won some gains last year. That reinforces the message that campaigning works and action gets results. If we stick together and take on the government, we may not win everything, but if we don't stand up for ourselves, we won't win anything. It's about being as united as possible to try to achieve our demands.

After the pause, how can we best navigate this crossroads in the campaign?

With a compelling endorsement from members last autumn we paused the action to allow talks to take place - while some positives have come out of those for the longer term, around coherence and the future of civil service pay bargaining, it's clear that in the 2024 pay round it's unlikely to be enough to call off the dispute.

So the next stage must be to ramp up the campaign at a time when we can influence the government, before they publish and implement their pay remit.

We all have to look at the issues that we're now in dispute over; pay, pensions and jobs. People need ask themselves, are they good enough? If not, it's clear the government isn't going to give us more out of benevolence. They're only going to do it if people take part in a campaign to demand better.

What is the "restoration" part of the pay claim?

Our primary demand has to be a pay rise that's above inflation - anything less is a pay cut. But we also want some recognition that pay has fallen behind by huge amounts. Depending which grade you are in, it has declined by between 18% and 62% since 2010. There is a clear need to recoup what people have lost. The pay claim doesn't place a figure on how much we're asking for. The amount lost is different by grade and obviously we don't want a race to the bottom. This allows us more flexibility in talks both with the current government and any incoming one.

What are your other main priorities?

We're pursuing our campaign around the minimum service levels law which effectively bans striking. The government is making it clear that in certain areas, which includes Border Force, they may seek to enforce their new law. We're taking legal advice and consulting with members on that.

There's also a lot going on with our anti-racism work. We are very firm on the need not just to defend our members and fight for equality, but also to give a voice to people that don't have one. Whether that's refugees under threat of being deported to Rwanda, or the small boats pushback policy, or the people of Palestine who are being torn apart by the attacks they face, and our demand for a ceasefire now.

And your hopes for the year ahead?

None of us have a crystal ball, but we know we're likely to face a new government during 2024. So it is vitally important that PCS doesn't just articulate what we don't want to see, but that we're very clear about the demands we would place on any incoming government.

For example, the Labour party is drawing up something called a New Deal for Working People, and we're doing some work around that. Our role is to ensure that we hold them to account on all of their pledges if they get into government.