

21 May 2024

Defending workers' rights at ONS

With PCS members at the Office for National Statistics (ONS) in the second week of action short of strike over the organisation's introduction of a mandatory workplace attendance policy, workers explain how it impacts on them.

Members voted overwhelmingly for strike action and action short of strike [in a ballot that closed on 2 April](#), in response to an instruction that staff spend at least 40% of their working time in an office, with effect from the start of April. They began action short of a strike on 8 May.

In November, the ONS senior leadership team (SLT) announced their intent to force 40% office attendance on ONS employees. The line was tough and there was no room for negotiation. ONS' senior leadership team (SLT) refused meaningful negotiations with PCS and other departmental trade unions.

But on 27 March, in response to pressure created by the PCS' flexible working campaign along with other trade unions, the SLT conceded additional flexibilities. Had PCS and others not taken a stand, colleagues living over an hour away from their nearest office would have been pressured under threat of disciplinary action to spend a large proportion of their salary on transport and accommodation to meet their 40% target.

Unfortunately, this additional flexibility only applies to staff who started employment between 1 March 2020 and 30 November 2023. And it is only informal flexibility, which can and will be removed at any time.

We understand the SLT intends to continue to erode staff flexible working arrangements over the coming months. And a senior leader in the organisation's people and business services insisted that if people are contracted to work every day in the week, they must be able to come into the office every day. She also stated 'attendance smoothing' is on the horizon. That involves forcing staff to work in the office on specific days to prevent facilities from being overwhelmed. Removing another flexible working benefit staff currently have.

Unequal partners

Two couples who work for ONS explain their different attendance targets.

Jane and her partner, Phil (not their real names), both work for ONS. They are the same grade and profession and do similar jobs that can both be completed remotely. Jane is being forced to spend 40% of her working hours in her assigned office, while Phil is only asked to spend 5% of his working hours there.

“I have worked here longer than my partner, yet I have worse employment conditions.” Jane told us. “There is no equality here, and I will not be gaslit into believing there is.”

And this isn't an isolated example. Johnathan and Ahmed (also not their real names) are partners who live together. Both of whom have different office attendance targets.

“I joined ONS before 1 March 2020, but my current role has only existed since the pandemic. The work has been completed remotely since then, and it clearly hasn't impacted team productivity.” Jonathan told us. “My commute costs and stress levels are now significantly higher than Ahmed's simply because of my start date. It's obscene.”

Jonathan had a flexible working request declined without the ONS consulting with him.

PCS has no issue with members and staff working from the office. But we won't stand by and watch the progressive erosion of workers' rights.

Urge your MP to show their support for our campaign by [signing a parliamentary early day motion](#).