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‘We’ll confine Rwanda policy to the dustbin of history’

It’s imperative that PCS does everything it can to stop a single refugee deportation flight taking off for Rwanda, conference delegates heard.

By continuing to successfully challenge the demonisation of refugees and asylum seekers, in this UK general election year our union seeks “not only to confine the Rwanda policy to the dustbin of history, but also to send this rancid Tory administration the same way”, said PCS head of bargaining Paul O’Connor as he moved motion A24. The motion was overwhelmingly carried.

Paul paid tribute to those who have shown the courage to stand up for refugees – including our Home Office members, comrades at Care4Calais, and lawyers at Duncan Lewis Solicitors “who put their necks on the line to do what is right”.

Seconding the motion, Jon from Home Office Croydon branch said he works on refugee integration with NGOs and local councils, who now often comment on PCS’s good work on the Rwanda policy. “It makes me proud that they know we are fighting against this,” he said.

Such a fight takes courage, said Paul as he recounted an incident in 2020 in which a man walked into the offices of Duncan Lewis carrying a combat knife, handcuffs, and Confederate and Nazi flags, and saying he was there to kill a solicitor. When challenged by brave staff, he said, “you’ve been helping these rats come to this country” and “Hitler was right”.

This is the “reality of life” for those who stand up for refugees, said Paul. He said he proud of the work the lawyers have done for PCS on defeating the ‘pushbacks’ in the channel, on the “disgraceful conditions” at the Manston migrant holding facility and on defeating the government’s Rwanda policy.

Paul said the Supreme Court judgement in November 2023, which upheld the Court of Appeal’s conclusion that the Rwanda policy is unlawful, has far-reaching legal and political implications. It confirms that there is a range of domestic and international legislation protecting refugees from refoulement – the forcing back

of people to their place of origin where they are expected to face persecution or threats to life and liberty – and that refugees deported to Rwanda would not be protected from it.

The litigation that PCS has pursued so far has achieved its objectives. But the fight is “far from over”, said Paul. The government has now attempted to legislate against reality existence by passing its so-called “Safety of Rwanda Bill” and will likely try to force a flight to Rwanda prior to the election.

PCS, Care4Calais and solicitors are ready to go ahead with further litigation if necessary and will do everything possible to stop the Tories playing this final “electoral card”, he pledged.

‘Performative politics’

Jon said the Rwanda policy is not only potentially asking PCS members to take part in unlawful activities, its stated intention as a deterrent will not be effective when those coming to the UK in small boats are so clearly desperate.

“It’s a performative politics policy,” he said.

“As a comrade of mine said, ‘only this government could come up with human trafficking as the solution to human trafficking’.”

He said the fact is it’s not safe for the UK to send asylum seekers to Rwanda and called for our trained asylum case workers to be allowed do their jobs properly.

Also supporting the motion, Guy from Home Office HQ said their branch had been silent on migration and immigration issues for too long.

“We as a group are opposed to the outsourcing of the UK’s obligations under the [UN] 1951 convention on refugees. We shall never accept that anyone seeking refuge in the UK should be deemed illegal on arrival,” he said.

“The policies of trying to [tackle] small boats with prison barracks and prison barges... with an alleged £8m a day going into the pockets of hotel owners, is anathema to humanism and internationalism. And it won’t stop lives being lost in the channel.”