

22 May 2024

Sexual harassment in the workplace

A fringe meeting at PCS conference reinforced learning on sexual harassment and updated reps on the incoming Worker Protection Act.

Content warning: contains references to sexual harassment and sexual violence.

PCS Acting Deputy President Jackie Green, who sits on the Women's TUC, chaired the meeting today (22). Before introducing the two speakers she reported a successful PCS conference in April addressing sexual harassment, and announced a forthcoming survey to better understand the prevalence of sexual harassment in branches.

Speaking first was Steven Warwick, who is PCS head of legal and employment rights. Formerly a PCS rep, he has expertise in supporting members who have faced third-party harassment. Steven reminded reps of the definition of sexual harassment and gave examples: commenting on someone's sex life, unwelcome physical contact, displaying sexually graphic pictures. Such behaviour can have either the purpose or effect of violating someone's dignity.

The Worker Protection Act comes into force in October 2024 and requires the employer to take reasonable steps to prevent sexual harassment from third parties, for example a customer or contractor. Reps should remind employers that they now need to review and update sexual harassment policies with additional training and effective investigatory mechanisms. In the light of TUC figures showing 3 in 5 women have experienced sexual harassment at work, Steven concluded that although the law is failing, we as a union can improve matters.

The next speaker was Bridget Corcoran, NEC member and DWP assistant group secretary, who also sits on the Women's TUC committee. She recounted her astonishment at the level of sexism encountered when she joined the civil service 10 years ago. Where that culture exists, there will be a culture of sexual harassment. This in turn leads to low levels of reporting, because of fear of reprisal, fear of being seen as a snitch, embarrassment, self-doubt, lack of trust, or being manipulated by perpetrator and made to feel responsible. Another

problem is lengthy grievance processes which create pressure on employees.

Bridget concluded with some practical steps: a survey of members to understand levels of sexual harassment, and promotion of the TUC sexual harassment toolkit with its workplace risk assessment. We need effective policies to create genuine zero tolerance. Training is available through PCS but employers must provide better training so that managers can better understand and prevent sexual harassment and hold perpetrators to account.