

12 August 2024

ONS members to escalate attendance dispute

PCS members at the Office for National Statistics (ONS) are stepping up their dispute over mandatory workplace attendance.

Since April 2024, ONS staff have to spend at least 40% of their time in the office, after management reversed their previous position that flexible hybrid working was in the best interests of the organisation and its employees.

The new policy does nothing to improve efficiency but robs staff of the flexibility to manage childcare and other domestic responsibilities and forces them to undertake unnecessary – and often very lengthy – journeys to carry out work that they could have done from home, often via virtual meetings with colleagues in other offices.

Having won an industrial action ballot, the union has pursued action short of a strike (ASOS) since May, in the form of non-compliance with the attendance policy. Members have been advised to spend as much or as little time in the office as they choose, rather than meet an arbitrary quota. The action has been well-supported and has had no adverse effect on productivity, proving PCS's point that maximum flexibility is the best policy all round. While management have not yet penalised anyone for non-compliance, they have refused to engage with us to negotiate a mutually acceptable outcome.

In a survey of PCS members, 88% who responded supported a continuation of action short of strike (ASOS), and 66% backed strike action if necessary. We have therefore informed management that, with effect from 27 August, we will be broadening out the ASOS to include a work-to-rule. If we still don't receive a positive response from management we will ballot members in September to renew the industrial action mandate, with the option of beginning strike action if successful.

PCS ONS group president, Grant Williams, said: "Our members just want to be able to do their jobs in the most efficient way possible – which means having maximum flexibility on the balance between home and office working. The legal

protection provided by our action has enabled them to do just that over the last few months and there has been no detriment to the organisation. But if ONS management think that our dispute will simply fizzle out when our current mandate expires, they are deeply mistaken. We have been open to talking to management all along and we appeal to them to take that opportunity now.”