

UK: Mark Serwotka – ‘Being Radical Only Works if You Bring People With You’

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Mark Serwotka has been general secretary of PCS union for 23 years. Set to retire at the end of the year, he discusses the recent wave of strikes involving 133,000 civil servants and reflects on what he has learnt in his time in the role.

Mark Serwotka has served as the general secretary of the Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union for 23 years. Representing workers across UK Government departments and public bodies, in recent years, the union has faced unrelenting attacks on the pay of its members and frequent confrontations between government ministers and civil servants.

Under Serwotka’s leadership, the PCS has become a more politically engaged and industrially combative union, taking legal action against the government’s Rwanda deportation plans, endorsing Labour for the first time in 2019, and taking national strike action to demand improved pay and conditions. This year, over 133,000 PCS members across 132 government departments have been engaged in a long and bitter industrial dispute over pay, pensions, redundancy terms and job security.

In June, the cabinet office announced a fresh pay offer of a 4.5 percent rise, plus an additional 0.5 percent for the lowest paid workers alongside a £1500 lump sum. In a consultation, members accepted the offer and endorsed the union’s industrial strategy by 90.3 percent. But with their eyes now set on pay for next year, the PCS union’s campaign is far from over.

Set to retire at the end of the year, Mark Serwotka speaks to Tribune, reflecting on the civil service union’s recent campaign of industrial action and his time in the role.

TA | At the start of the PCS campaign, you called for a 10 percent pay rise. In the end, you accepted a lot less. Some of your members have criticised the deal and argued that the union should have continued fighting to secure a higher pay rise. How do you respond to those criticisms?

MS | 90 percent of our members voted to accept the offer and continue our campaign. Those who accused us of settling are wrong. If you look at what we put to members, we had won more money from the government for the first time in 40 years through national strike action. That wasn’t enough, and we’re very clear that it’s not enough. But one of the things that we won was national talks about changing civil service pay structures to deal with low pay and inherent issues. Our take was that you should pause the strikes, get into the talks, and re-evaluate. We had a vote no campaign largely on social media. They got 9.3 percent of the vote. We’re talking double Liz Kendall’s vote in the 2015 Labour leadership election. It was tiny.

TA | It’s very likely now that your members will probably be negotiating with the Labour government next year. Do you have any confidence that they will be able to secure decent

pay settlements under an incoming Labour government?

MS | I believe that you've got to give everybody a chance. The PCS will meet with Labour and be clear that we need pay restoration and then inflation-busting pay rises. I'm confident that we'll get a fairer hearing than what we would receive under the Conservatives, but I wouldn't say I'm confident they'll deliver what we're asking.

We have to get the Conservatives out, but the Labour Party has to earn the right to win, and they have to enthuse people with something positive. This is very different to 1997. The union movement now is much more resurgent. Having had a year where we've had an unprecedented number of strikes, I don't think what Labour's offering is good enough.

When Labour chooses to demonstrate their fiscal responsibility by refusing to get rid of the inhumane and abhorrent two-child cap on benefits, you have to ask what they are standing for. In a crisis, people don't want to hear about fiscal responsibility; they want to hear about tackling poverty and despair and how they will cut NHS waiting lists and restore public services.

It's hard to get a straight answer from Labour on whether they even support inflation-proof pay rises for public sector workers. We want Labour to win — of course we do — but they have to set out a vision.

The next election is going to be about how terrible the Tories are. But if Labour fails to enthuse people, they might only be a minority government. And there won't be a honeymoon period like there was in 1997. Even back then, disillusionment about the lack of change set in after a few years, and you saw unions electing far more left-wing leaders in response.

People want more than they are getting. That's why so many workers have been on strike. You can't put the genie back in the bottle. Regardless of who is in No 10, if your pay is less than inflation, you want something done about it. The way to head that off is for Labour to be more visionary and assure people who are desperate that they will make radical changes.

TA | You've been general secretary for twenty-three years. Trade unions have massively changed in that time. What have you learned in that time? And what message would you give to your successor?

MS | I think the trade union movement is on the up. In my time, it has had more troughs than peaks. As I said in my speech at Congress, when we look at the consequences of austerity, we bear responsibility in that we did not adequately resist it in 2010 and 2011. When the history of the trade union movement is written, it will say that we failed to combat austerity. And now we're paying the price.

What I have learnt is that you have to build in the workplace. You have to organise. Radical policies are not radical if you don't implement them. Moving forward, it is refreshing that more and more unions are taking action, that they are more diverse than ever before, and the picket lines are younger than ever before.

I'm leaving at a point where things can only get better. One of the ironies is it was probably the Tories' anti-union legislation that forced us to embrace the case that you only win through struggle if you can mobilise the majority in the union. When you look back at the ballot results that unions had in the public sector before the 2016 Trade Union Act, unions were winning strike ballots with 20 to 25 percent turnout. You now have to have a 50 percent turnout, so you have to work tirelessly at engagement, participation, and getting people involved in the union structures.

TA | You say the union movement is on the up. When we look at the figures from last year, union membership declined by 200,000, and membership is particularly low in the private sector, where 80 percent of workers work. Despite a wave of strikes, it seems that unions haven't adapted to a changing economy.

MS | There are two parts to this: the public and the private sector. During the teacher's strike, the NEU (National Education Union) recruited 70,000 new members in a few weeks. The PCS has a higher membership than at any time since the check-off system [where employers deduct union subs from wages and transfer the money to unions] was abolished. We can clearly see that union membership increased when there were strikes.

The private sector is a tough nut to crack. Some of the organising in Amazon and elsewhere is interesting because it shows how too many unions think of their own union first rather than the interests of working people in general. How many unions are squabbling over which union a minority of people are in rather than wanting them all in a union? There has to be far more cooperation and strategic agreement. Because frankly, if you've got ten in this union, six in that union, four in that one, and 200 not in any union, you're never going to get anywhere. And obviously, the way the economy is going, it's tough.

But we know it's easier in the public sector. During the pandemic, we embraced Zoom and new ways of working. We ran a strike in the DVLA (Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency) over Covid-19 that was almost entirely down to online organising. It's doable, but you've got to give people a hand and get younger people to show you the way forward. There's a lot to learn.

We're on the up in terms of how many more strikes there are now. It's also important that many of these workers are winning things for the first time. In our dispute, we didn't get what we originally wanted, but we won more than they would have given us if we hadn't taken action. It's important to remember this. When our union is next asking members to strike again, I can look them in the eye and say that the last time you went on strike, you won something. This success builds momentum.

We are at a crossroads. If we take our foot off the pedal and decide not to challenge an incoming Labour government, that momentum can dissipate very quickly. You've got to work at it constantly. This is why a constant focus on engagement in the workplace is key for trade unions.

Trade unions also need to link the focus on the workplace with wider social issues like climate change, which will be huge for the trade union movement. If we can embrace that agenda, not only can we attract a lot of young people who care about the environment, but we can make the argument around jobs and the economy.

We are on the up, but that's from a low base that's nowhere near where it was in the 1970s when I was leaving school. We're achieving progress, but much more must be done.

TA | Why are you backing Fran Heathcote to succeed you as general secretary?

MS | A lot of people are asking me about the things I've achieved. I think the mark of any leader in the union is the team they build around them. So, they are not my achievements, they are a team effort. And she has been an integral part of that team. We need a woman general secretary in PCS. We have a majority of women members, but we've never had a woman leader. She's an incredibly hard-working frontline activist. She is a team player with a radical edge who is very popular among members.

One of the things trade unions and the labour movement have to think about is the dangers of

sectarianism from small elements of the Left and making the mistake of being radical without necessarily representing the people they're there to represent. You asked me earlier about the criticism that we've had. To be quite blunt, the people in our union making the most noise saying we were selling out hadn't been on strike for a single day because they failed to get over the threshold to take strike action in the areas they were organising. You can be left-wing, and you can sell a newspaper, and that's fine. But you've got to be able to represent the workers you represent.

What Fran believes is that being radical only works if you bring people with you. If you are too far ahead of everyone, you can be radical and never deliver anything. If you are too far behind them, people don't think the union is actually going to galvanise and fight for them. That balance has to be struck and fought for, and it changes constantly. I believe she would be an outstanding leader who understands that, and that's why I very much hope she wins.

Our union used to be one of the most right-wing unions. I was sacked before I took office by the old right-wing executive. There is no longer an organised Right in our union. But to confuse that with thinking there are no people in the union who are centre or centre-right is bonkers because all unions make up society. If you are more radical, you have a duty to work hard to understand what you believe and how you can win that.

When I spoke at Labour Party conference in 2019, I said that our union was not affiliated to Labour and had never previously urged our members to vote in a particular way, but that we would be campaigning, for the first time ever, for a Labour government.

That change in position didn't come about because I said that Corbyn was a decent chap. It came about because of the painstaking work that started with making the argument to our members that, as civil servants, they are employed by the government, so it matters who is in government. We made these arguments in a non-party political way over the course of years. At the last election, it allowed us to look at the manifestos and ask: who's committed to national bargaining in the civil service and who's committed to investment and more jobs? Labour, that's who.

If I had a regret, it would be that it took us as long as it did to devise a strategy of industrial action that was finally effective. Just to leave you this story, if you look at the history of the civil service, every strike has been a one-day strike, and then everybody goes back to work. This time, it was one-day strikes with other unions for scale and political pressure. But it was won on the back of those strikes that lasted for weeks in the passport offices, the Border Force, and the rural payments agency. Every member put five pounds more on a compulsory basis on their membership subs to support the lowest-paid workers. It was a huge move, which meant everyone was able to strike. That five-pound contribution meant people were able to go on strike for six weeks. And again, I use that as an example of how it took years to evolve. So, I think the union is in a good place. It's now in a place with new leaders. And hopefully, we can build on the work that has been done to go from strength to strength.

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