

Heathrow third runway speech

Thank you for opportunity to speak to you.

My union, PCS, represents 180,000+ workers in civil service and privatised and semi privatised public services.

PCS is one of a small number of trade unions that oppose the third runway, and possibly the only one with a national policy of opposition on environmental grounds. We are proud to express our solidarity with people fighting for their communities, their health and their quality of life.

However, there's a but coming. A lot of people depend on the airport for their employment. Many of those workers support the third runway because they see it as a way of securing their future employment, less chance of being laid off due to efficiencies by their employer if that employer now has to fill three runways worth instead of two, etc.

Jobs are the very reason for a trade unions existence, and threats to jobs have to be opposed. To do anything else would be going against the fundamental principles of a union. So a number of unions - Unite, Prospect, GMB - for those reasons, are vehemently in support of the runway. You'll find the same thing among unions who represent workers in the fossil fuel industries; they know that fossil fuels are killing our planet, but the members whose jobs they protect rely on those industries for their livelihoods.

So let me tell you about PCS. We are the leading trade union in the country when it comes to the environmental agenda. 99% of our membership doesn't work in the aviation industry. So when our national conference debates a motion proposing we oppose the third runway on environmental grounds, our conference, conscious of the impact of aircraft noise, the health hazard of appalling air quality, and the catastrophic consequences of runaway climate change, has an easy decision to pass that motion, and play an active role in the campaign to oppose the third runway.

But 1% of our membership does work in the aviation industry, the very members I represent as aviation group president, and several hundred of those work at Heathrow airport. Our members at Heathrow support the runway for the same reasons as other unions. They see their future job security as tied to airport expansion and if there are cuts, having jobs over three runways holds out better prospects for them than two runways. From their perspective, they feel that PCS, by supporting a campaign that is perceived as a threat to their jobs, is not doing the basic job of protecting its members.

And yet, the environmental cost of a third runway is a huge price to pay. To take just one element of it, 40,000 premature deaths linked to poor air quality is a tragedy that we have to address not make worse. Someone asked me don't these people understand that a few jobs are nothing compared to what we're doing to the planet. I'll tell you how I answered that in a minute, but it is a fair point to make. We do have to have a sense of perspective, and by any perspective, a quarter of a million additional flights in and out of Heathrow every year is tough to justify when set along the impact that will have on real people.

But, for us it is also true that we have to protect our members at Heathrow, regardless of whether the third runway goes ahead or not. That's a tough circle to square. And the first step in doing that is to understand why workers at the airport take the position they do.

I found myself saying in answer to that question that job security is very important to them. It's what is right in front of your face, the day to day struggle to have some kind of life, for you and your family. How are you going to sacrifice that, no matter how compelling the argument about environmental disaster. And when employers are attacking workers' pay, pensions, and terms and conditions, expansion is a way of preserving your job. And this government certainly doesn't help, having made losing your job into a fast track to precarious, low paid, zero hours work, or no work at all, a struggle to get social security, and demonisation as a scrounger. Those are the underlying reasons why those workers - however much they might understand the consequences - cannot contemplate any action that puts their livelihood at risk.

We have worked very closely with the members at the branch, with the help of John McDonnell, to assure them that opposition to the third runway does not mean that we are not supporting them, nor that we want their jobs to be under threat. And if ultimately full agreement can't be reached, we are at least clearly on the same side as regards job protection.

PCS also commissioned a study, by Professor Roger Seifert, to look at the job claims made by Heathrow. The idea was not to throw numbers in our members faces to try and change their minds about supporting the runway, but to get some realism on what appeared to be some pretty extravagant claims. I have heard figures quoted for jobs created ranging from about 30,000 all the way up to 180,000 depending on how wide the net is cast.

It's worth reading Professor Seifert's report to see just how misleading those numbers are. His report can be found on the PCS web site by searching for Heathrow jobs. The report does say that jobs will be created, and it would be foolish to deny that that will be the case. We also have to recognise that growth at the airport will have economic benefits to the U.K., while not growing could pass those benefits to competitors.

But the Seifert report deconstructs the scale of job creation...

- The employer always takes the most optimistic assumptions, and the values that will produce the highest outcome
- Many of the jobs will actually displace jobs elsewhere, including at other airports as Heathrow growth stifles other growth
- Unsubstantiated dependency on behaviour by other employers to generate those jobs.

For workers at the airport that type of analysis is unlikely to shake the core instinctual belief that three runways will produce more jobs than two. And job loss elsewhere is hardly likely to be a deterrent.

And yet it's not inevitable or inarguable. That is why, not just here, but in our society generally, PCS argues for the alternative. We have fought for years for an alternative economic strategy to the government's austerity agenda. That argument was marginal when we started and now, especially following the recent election, it has become mainstream. We want to apply the same logic here, to say that airports expansion is not the only way of

producing economic benefits, nor is it the only way of providing transport to the public, or of protecting the jobs of our members.

We support an integrated transport system that is publicly owned, joined up and green, just as we support renewable energy to replace fossil fuels. We can make the world better not worse. And we want the jobs created to make those things happen. The One Million Climate Jobs booklet lays out the foundations of what that jobs programme might look like and the benefits it can bring to our society.

- We need to restore the jobs lost through so-called cost efficiencies to ensure the safety and the environmental impacts of aviation.
- We need to look at utilising other airports if we really must have more flying, which means coordinated planning instead of the competitive model.
- We need to look at how much extra flying we do actually need when 70% of flying is done by 15% of the population, and half of people don't fly at all.
- And we need to look to other modes of transport to take some of the strain without the detrimental impacts.

We know we are not going to get that kind of joined-up thinking from this government, but a Labour government that promotes an alternative economic and industrial strategy can do it. That's what we want to see from Labour, some vision to support a just transition for the benefit of all.

And because our members and all those who feel they are protecting their jobs by supporting the third runway can't be dissuaded by abstract concepts, we need concrete proposals from a government that is willing to see them through. Then we can win those workers over to our cause, and free them to be the people we know they really are, concerned about air quality, noise, their local communities, and global warming.

So to finish let me repeat PCS stands in solidarity with workers and communities that oppose the third runway, but we also want to see an alternative to safeguard jobs, provide transport services to the public, and protect the environment. Not just a choice between yes and no, but between yes and a better yes. Thank you.