

GCHQ ban - 40 years on

The GCHQ trade union ban was a ban on trade union membership for workers at the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) in Cheltenham between 1984 and 1997.

In 1984, Margaret Thatcher announced that it wasn't possible for someone to be in a union and be loyal to their country. GCHQ employees were denied their basic rights and could no longer have the protection of a union at work, provoking a sustained 13 year long campaign, unparalleled in modern labour history.

In 1988 fourteen workers who refused to give up their union membership cards were unceremoniously sacked in what became one of the most important trade union issues of the 1980s and the 1990s.

For more than thirteen years, in what was one of the longest continuously fought dispute in British trade union history, trade union members in GCHQ and their unions campaigned against the ban, inspired by a small group of sacked GCHQ staff with the late Mike Grindley, a Chinese linguist, as their spokesperson.

Marches and rallies in Cheltenham took place in January every year; two TUC Days of Action were called, including when the sackings took place in 1988; and legal challenges, roadshows and invitations to trade union conferences placed further pressure on the UK government. The decision was condemned by the international trade union movement, politicians from across the political spectrum, and many international organisations including the UN's International Labour Organisation.

After a long and inspirational campaign, the ban was consigned to history in 1997. But the political rationale behind the decision by Thatcher – a hostility to the very existence of trade unions – remains.

Attacks on unions and their ability to fight for justice and fairness at work are still with us. In 2023, we have seen how the Tories – through the minimum service levels legislation – are attempting to undermine trade union freedoms.

By remembering and celebrating this historical campaign, we can better understand present-day attempts to undermine trade union rights and learn lessons on how to resist these attacks.

[Follow our timeline of the GCHQ union ban and campaign for more information.](#)

Thousands attended a [march and rally in Cheltenham on 27 January 2024](#), which PCS supported.

[Download and read our pamphlet about the trade union ban and the history of the campaign](#) (login to PCS Digital required).