

11 December 2023

Join us in Cheltenham for 40th anniversary of GCHQ union ban

On 27 January, 2024, we are marking the 40th anniversary of the ban on trade unions at GCHQ with a joint PCS/TUC event in Cheltenham.

On 25 January 1984, all Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) workers were ordered to leave their trade unions by 1 March or face dismissal. Those who signed away their rights received a payment of £1,000 less tax.

Over 100 GCHQ workers refused to sign away their union rights, but it wasn't until late 1988 that the government sacked the last 14 workers who were still holding out.

[Read more about the GCHQ campaign](#) and [look at our timeline](#) of how it started and what happened when.

Announced at the [TUC special Congress](#) in London on Saturday (9), the joint PCS/TUC march and rally will take place through Cheltenham, the home of GCHQ, to mark the anniversary of this ban on **27 January** - the first Saturday after the anniversary.

Several high-profile speakers from across the trade union movement, along with many members who were involved (or their families), are expected to speak at the event, which will also have musical entertainment.

The march is planned to follow the route that the GCHQ campaigners took on their annual demonstrations, starting at Montpellier Gardens from noon.

Following the march, there will be a Tolpuddle marquee at Pittville Park in the town to host a rally, as well as a more private gathering in the evening for the families of those who were sacked. A special pamphlet is also being produced to mark the anniversary of the ban.

More information about the anniversary commemorations can be found on the [TUC website](#). Members are also encouraged to [register their attendance](#).

The GCHQ Union Campaign

The response to the Tory government's GCHQ ban on trade union membership turned into one of the longest continuously fought disputes in UK trade union history. For more than 13 years, a small group of brave GCHQ staff and their unions campaigned for the right to belong to a union, commanding huge support throughout the labour movement.

Their principled and sustained campaign ended in 1997, when the new Labour government overturned the ban on unions. Staff at GCHQ are now members of PCS.

The march and rally on 27 January 2024 are not only a special commemoration of the ban and the unprecedented campaign which opposed it. They are also a moment to reflect on our own resistance today to persistent attacks on trade union freedoms.

In echoes of the GCHQ union ban, the government is seeking to restrict the right to strike for over five million workers through [minimum service levels](#).

It was revealed in early 2023 that prime minister Rishi Sunak was considering banning our members in the Border Force from having trade union membership.

More recently, the Tories launched their latest move to restrict workers' rights, introducing the Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Act. The law says that when workers in certain sectors lawfully vote to strike, they could be forced to attend work – and sacked if they don't comply.

These plans [threaten to strip the democratic right to strike](#) from hundreds of thousands of workers, including thousands of our members in Border Force and the Passport Office.

Like Thatcher's GCHQ ban of 1984, it's obvious that this crude legislation is designed to limit the effectiveness of trade unions.

TUC general secretary Paul Nowak said: "40 years on, unions will march through Cheltenham to commemorate the GCHQ victory and to demonstrate continued defiance against minimum service level regulations and attacks on the right to strike.

"We will once again show a Conservative government that the full force of the union movement stands behind any worker sacked for trade union activity."