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Historic Congress calls for Mass Opposition to Anti-strike Laws

At the first special TUC congress since 1982, the trade union movement vowed to resist laws which threaten union members' right to take strike action.

The historic conference on 9 December was called to respond to the government's plans to implement strict anti-strike restrictions, which would [effectively criminalise strike action for thousands of our Home Office members](#), including border security staff and an unknown number of workers in the Passport Office.

The Minimum Service Levels Act would limit the impact of a strike by forcing workers to maintain a level of service through the use of minimum service levels (MSLs). The laws say that when workers lawfully vote to strike, they could be forced to attend work – and sacked if they do not comply

On Saturday, congress voted unanimously to resist and mobilise against MSLs, pledging to [march through Cheltenham on 27 January for the 40th anniversary of GCHQ workers sacked](#) for refusing to turn in their union cards, to call an urgent demonstration and provide support in the event a union or worker is sanctioned in relation to a work notice, and to mount legal challenges.

Congress also vowed to hold Labour to their commitment to repeal this legislation within their first 100 days of office and to call on all employers and public bodies to oppose this legislation - naming and shaming any employer who deploys a work notice as anti-union and anti-worker.

PCS at special congress

During the first of two panel discussions made up of workers who will be affected by these laws, Pete Wright, our Home Office group vice president, [gave the perspective of Border Force members](#), calling minimum service levels a “direct attack on our fundamental human right to withdraw labour”.

“After taking targeted, sustained action at both airports and maritime ports, our members received an average pay rise of 8% and a £1,500 one off non-consolidated payment,” he said. “We have no doubt that the shift to 8% came about as a result of our members taking industrial action.

PCS president Fran Heathcote [reminded the conference](#) of the relevance of the GCHQ ban to recent attacks on trade union freedoms and said that this legislation “is about one thing and one thing only: restricting the right to strike and our members’ ability to fight back against low pay and bad bosses.”

“We need to discuss and share tactics to beat this legislation,” she concluded her speech. “Just as we showed at GCHQ all them years ago, our strength is in our collective.”

At war with workers

Matt Wrack, president of the TUC and general secretary of the Fire Brigades Union, highlighted the 829,000 days that were lost to strike action in 2023: “We make no apologies for workers standing up for themselves”.

“You send a work notice to a union, you threaten the right to strike, and you should expect to find 48 unions ready to respond,” vowed Paul Nowak, the TUC general secretary.

Unite leader Sharon Graham declared that the government is “at war with workers” and warned congress that one union or group of workers will be the first test case of the laws. “Real solidarity to push this back may take us outside the law,” she said.

Mick Lynch, general secretary of the RMT, promised that his union would “consider entering industrial disputes” with employers if they did not receive “satisfactory guarantees” that work notices to ensure a minimum service level would never be issued.

Daniel Kebede, general secretary of the National Education Union, said minimum service levels are only “dreamed of ” by his members. These did not exist in the schools system even on non-strike days, he said, due to inadequate funding, pay, excessive workloads and recruitment problems.

PCS has been [urging the public](#) to put pressure on their MPs into opposing these anti-strike restrictions. Several MPs have already [slammed these proposed laws](#) as a political attack on the democratic right to withdraw labour, as virtually

unworkable in practice, and as potential breaches of international law.

These anti-strike laws are also seen by PCS and other unions as an [authoritarian crackdown on the human right to take industrial action](#).

Read how you can [join the march on 27 January](#), learn [more about the GCHQ campaign](#), and [look at our timeline](#) which follows this historic campaign from start to end.