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The lessons to learn today from the GCHQ union ban

Ahead of the rally in Cheltenham on 27 January to mark the 40th anniversary of the ban on unions at GCHQ, Hugh reflects on the historical significance of this struggle and its relevance to recent attacks on trade union freedoms.

The public reason that the Margaret Thatcher government gave for [the union ban at GCHQ in 1984](#) was the industrial action that the civil service had taken in 1981. They claimed that this disrupted the intelligence operations of GCHQ.

But the real reason was that she believed there was a “conflict of loyalty” between belonging to a trade union and working for the government at GCHQ. She thought that, fundamentally, trade unions were a hostile enemy within.

There was a wider anti-trade union agenda that had taken root at the time of the ban. Against a backdrop of big disputes in different sectors, there were new trade union laws being introduced that affected strikes, picketing, balloting - all interfering with how unions were run.

The GCHQ ban sought to give the impression that there was nothing to stop the government from breaking up and weakening the trade union movement. But it didn't turn out to be so easy for them.

There were two main reasons why this ban, and the campaign which overturned it, struck a chord with so many trade unionists across the UK and became such a celebrated cause across the world.

One is that it wasn't an ordinary industrial dispute. It was the government of the day banning the right to belong to a trade union, which is the most fundamental

right for workers. It struck right at the very heart of democracy.

The other reason is the response of the members themselves, particularly those who were sacked in 1988. These were people who put their jobs, their careers and their personal lives on the line in order to fight to reinstate their right to belong to a trade union.

The trade union movement in this country and abroad saw the ban as a red line. If Thatcher got away with banning unions at GCHQ, we would be next. The campaign became a symbol of opposition to a broader anti-trade union agenda.

Looking back, there have unfortunately been plenty of 'glorious' defeats in trade union history. But it is equally important that we celebrate struggles where we actually achieved something.

It was a major achievement after 13 years of campaigning to see the ban defeated. People were offered their jobs back, union and pension rights were restored. There are other lessons to learn from it as well.

One is the lesson of unity. There was unity between nine civil service unions at the time. Younger PCS members may find it difficult to imagine there being so many unions. But one of the reasons why PCS came into existence is because of the ban and the campaign that followed.

The dispute teaches us the value of collective action, of how it can bring about change and positive outcomes. But also, that individuals can make a difference: the 14 people who were sacked stepped forward knowing what would happen.

We owe them a great debt for it - we might not be operating as free, independent unions as we are now if it hadn't been for the GCHQ campaign.

Today, the Tories just keep coming back with different ways of trying to prevent collective action. It was banning unions at GCHQ, it was thresholds, it was picketing - and now it's minimum service levels. They are all different versions of the same agenda.

Members today could learn from the GCHQ campaign that you have to keep on fighting for those rights; they don't get handed to you. Standing up for them is critical if you want to maintain them.

As this historic campaign showed us, change does not happen automatically - even with pledges from politicians and parties.

Only the unity and the determination of the trade union movement can ensure that this legislation will not succeed - and that we will fight for better and fairer legislation until it is replaced with a regime of workers' rights that allows unions to operate freely.

**Get involved [in the march and rally in Cheltenham on 27 January](#)
supported by PCS.**