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# Celebrating GCHQ campaign success 40 years on

Renowned journalist Richard Norton-Taylor says next Saturday's PCS-TUC national march in Cheltenham is a timely event given the present government's attempts to weaken trade unions

The trade union movement, led by the PCS, will next Saturday (27 January) mark one of the most arbitrary, authoritarian, decisions imposed by a British government in recent times – the ban on trade unions members at GCHQ, the government's biggest intelligence-gathering agency.

A march and rally in Cheltenham, the home of GCHQ, will recall that day, 40 years ago, 25 January 1984. And it will celebrate the success of the sustained campaign, unparalleled in modern labour history, that led to the overturning of the ban in one of the first acts of the Labour government, returned to power with a large majority, 13 years later, in 1997.

It will be a most timely event given the present government's attempts to weaken trade unions, especially those in the public sector and those working in transport and other public services. The forthcoming train drivers' strike may provide a first test of the Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Act, widely criticised as being unworkable, indeed counter-productive. The act covers the Border Force among other agencies.

## **Assault on whole movement**

In 1984, Margaret Thatcher claimed that there was an "inherent conflict between the structure of trade unions and loyalty to the state". The claim sent shudders

not only throughout trade unions and their members. The fourth estate – the media – large sections of which were (and remain) hostile to the Labour movement – even the mandarins of Whitehall, were stunned by what was seen as an assault on the whole trade union movement. And it was far from popular within the country's security and intelligence establishment, concerned about being dragged into an unwelcome and unnecessary public dispute.

I covered the dispute throughout for the Guardian newspaper and soon developed a close relationship with those most directly involved, including Hugh Lanning and John Sheldon, later of course of the PSC, then stalwarts of the Civil Service Union, and with Mike Grindley, spokesman for those who refused to accept the union ban.

The relationships were based on mutual trust. Despite, or rather because of, the alluring feature of GCHQ as a “centre of spies”, I did not want to compromise those involved in the dispute by asking them about secret operations. (GCHQ management did not appear to have trusted me, however. Over the telephone, I arranged to meet Mike one day at a Cheltenham pub. Soon after we met there, a smart, grey suited, tie-wearing, man entered, and helped himself to a half a pint before positioning himself at a corner table. Mike told me he was responsible for GCHQ security. He did not intimidate us and was simply wasting his time.)

### **Thatcher's “capricious autocracy”**

Denis Healey, shadow foreign secretary at the time, and most definitely not a member of the Labour left, damned what he called Thatcher's “capricious autocracy”. He said the union ban had forced on GCHQ staff “the most damaging conflict of loyalty known to man – loyalty to principle as against loyalty to family” – a reference to the prospect of dismissal shattering the lives of those who refused to give up their trade union rights.

Thatcher's claim that previous industrial action had disrupted GCHQ operations was rebutted by the defence secretary, John Nott. He told MPs that earlier disputes at the agency had “not in any way affected operational capability in any area”. Sir Geoffrey Howe, the foreign secretary, told MPs later that there was no evidence any damage had been done.

He retracted his claim that industrial action at GCHQ had damaged the national interest during the 1982 Falklands crisis – it emerged that ministers and management had praised GCHQ staff, many of whom were union members, for their exceptional efforts during that conflict.

What seriously damaged GCHQ was nothing to do with the presence of trade union members but everything to do with those responsible for security – as the case of Geoffrey Prime, a former GCHQ officer, caught in 1982 spying for the Soviet Union demonstrated. (With bitter irony, it was suggested in some Whitehall circles that the Prime case had encouraged Thatcher to impose the union ban because the case led to the government's first official public "avowal" of GCHQ's intelligence-gathering role.)

### **Tireless commitment to their cause**

The trade union ban faced GCHQ staff with an awful dilemma – whether to stand by their principles and lose their jobs, or simply accept the government's unjust ultimatum, imposed with not the slightest evidence to back it up.

Some GCHQ staff resigned in protest, some were forced to resign and were transferred to other government jobs. Fourteen refused to give up and were sacked. This extraordinary band, led by the modest, tireless, Mike Grindley, attracted phenomenal support among the wider trade union movement, addressing conferences, and organising rallies – including an annual march through Cheltenham and an annual pilgrimage to Dorset in memory of the Tolpuddle Martyrs. They shared a deep, tireless, commitment to their cause.

They were supported by union leaders, the Council of Civil Service Unions, (CCSU) in particular by PCS's Hugh Lanning and his former boss and former PCS general secretary, John Sheldon. The two were in the fight from the start – Lanning, then Civil Service Union (CSU) national officer responsible for GCHQ members, and Sheldon then CSU general secretary.

Lanning was the chief trade union negotiator with GCHQ management in complicated, difficult, and semi-clandestine, discussions leading to an agreement, paving the way to the return of trade unions to GCHQ, soon after Labour's stunning general election victory in 1997.

The agreement recognised PCS as the sole national trade union at GCHQ, the sacked staff were offered their jobs back, all their conditions of service, legal, and pension rights were restored. The deal included an arbitration agreement binding on the Treasury, a first for the public sector.

Hugh in particular, supported by Charlie Cochrane of CCSU and later PSC negotiator and pension maestro, were vital to the success, but all those involved in ending this prolonged dispute in an agency engaged in such sensitive operations, should be applauded.

Dennis Mitchell, a senior GCHQ who resigned in protest at the union ban, said during the dispute: "GCHQ provides power to the British government...GCHQ staff have a moral responsibility, both corporate and individual, for the use to which that power is put". The only watchdog, Mitchell added, was the workforce. It was a most telling and appropriate observation.