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Why I was sacked by GCHQ for being a trade unionist

Ahead of the rally in Cheltenham on 27 January to mark the 40th anniversary of the ban on unions at GCHQ, Alan - the first trade unionist at GCHQ to be sacked in 1988 - writes about the ban, his determination to fight it, and the importance of support from the trade union movement.

Towards the end of 1983, GCHQ was publicly acknowledged as being in existence for the first time. We got no inkling that this would lead to a sacking or threat of sacking.

At 3pm on 25 January,1984, every single member at the station I was working at received a brown envelope. We didn't know what it was for.

We opened it and we were shocked – it turned out to be the ruling that GCHQ staff could no longer be union members. People couldn't believe what they were reading; we all thought it was a joke.

Then management started saying that there were large numbers of people signing to give up their union rights. In exchange for doing this, GCHQ colleagues accepted £1,000 - what I would call a bribe. But there were about 100 of us who refused to sign away our union rights.

Eventually we started meeting with people and the discussion was: why did they do this? There was a suggestion that one of our international partners was behind it, but I think it was much closer to home. It was very personal to Margaret Thatcher.

We were seen as the soft underbelly of the trade union movement. If they could get rid of us, they could move on to the next step, which was the Miners' Strike. Unfortunately, they beat the miners – but they couldn't beat us.

I was the first person to be sacked in 1988. I got two letters to my home address–one said that I still had the option to sell my trade union rights with a deadline. The second letter had the ultimatum that if you don't sell your union rights, we will sack you – and they did.

When I was sacked, I walked out of the station and I remember saying, 'I will return'. And I did, thanks to the support of my union.

After the sacking, our spirits would be up for a meeting but down in between. But I started working for my MP and became politicised. I was very active in my local Labour party.

It's strange because people often say I would have done the same thing as you, but I don't believe them. That's because I don't know I'd do the same as me; it was just the circumstances at the time. It was a very difficult period.

It was sheer bloody mindedness that kept me going right from the start. I didn't like the fact that people were telling me I couldn't be in a trade union. That really got to me. And I just wanted to put it right.

It was a fantastic feeling that the TUC and the trade union movement threw its full weight behind our campaign. We experienced that support mainly at the annual march and rally in Cheltenham, where thousands of people came to support us at huge rallies in tents. It's what really kept us going.

I remember telling a general assembly of trade union leaders at the TUC that we can't do it on our own. I told them you need to help us – and they did.

Being part of a trade union is more than paying your subs and getting a free will. It is the solidarity of everyone feeling the same. And it is trade unions which made it possible for this ban to be rectified.

After I got sacked, I read a lot of trade union history. You read about The Matchgirls, you read about the Tolpuddle Martyrs, you read all of this and you marvel at it. But the union ban at GCHQ happened recently – and we can still talk to people who were directly affected.

They can tell you that if you are a part of a trade union, somebody has got your back.

But we can't just place this ban in history. Every time a Conservative government gets elected, they try to take us back to a time when people didn't have any rights. In my view, the only happy workforce is one that gets a fair day's pay for a fair day's work, and that has good facilities and conditions.

Get involved in the [march and rally in Cheltenham on 27 January](#) which PCS is supporting.