

29 January 2024

Thousands attend GCHQ march in Cheltenham

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Announced at the TUC special congress in London in December, a joint PCS/TUC march and rally took place on 27 January in Cheltenham to mark [the 40th anniversary of the ban on trade union membership at GCHQ](#).

As well as commemorating the GCHQ workers' victory, thousands of trade unionists from across the UK came together to recommit the labour movement to defiant opposition to minimum service levels, trade union restrictions and any threat to the right to strike.

The march, which was led by PCS, the sacked workers and their families, with the TUC and other trade union leaders, started at Cheltenham's Montpellier Gardens at noon and ended with a rally at 2pm in Pittville Park.

The hour-long march followed a similar route to that taken by the sacked GCHQ workers on their annual marches in Cheltenham - part of their inspirational campaigning efforts to overturn the union ban.

Following musical entertainment from Jess Silk, several high-profile speakers from across the trade union movement spoke at the event, which was compered by PCS general secretary-elect Fran Heathcote.

Opening the rally, Fran reminded those who had just marched through Cheltenham that they were there to remember those 14 civil servants who suffered under Margaret Thatcher's ban, before introducing our outgoing general secretary, Mark Serwotka, who [announced that PCS has launched a judicial review against the government's minimum service laws](#).

After recounting being a civil servant at the time of the GCHQ union ban and commending the bravery of the sacked workers, he pointed out the PCS argument that the proposed strike restrictions in the Border Force contravene the right to strike enshrined in Article 11 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

Mark promised that we would win this judicial review because the legislation affecting members in the Border Force "effectively means that they are banning the right of people to strike."

"GCHQ workers said no and won back their right to union membership," he added. "We all as a movement say no to banning the right to strike and we will win - and we will prevail."

TUC general secretary [Paul Nowak](#) thanked Mark Serwotka for his contribution as a trade union leader, "for standing up for working class people" throughout his career.

Addressing the government, Nowak said that "the trade union movement has beaten you once, and we'll beat you again...Repeal the anti-strike legislation", adding that: "We will fight for the right to strike and for every worker's right to strike".

Unite general secretary Sharon Graham said the workers took on the lie that their union membership undermined national security.

"I say to the government today, you are the real threat to national security," she said, adding later that minimum service levels "puts the government at war with workers."

She called on the Labour Party to repeal these anti-trade union restrictions not within the first 100 days — as they are currently promising — but on the first day of parliament if they are elected into power.

National Education Union general secretary Daniel Kebede told the rally that a minimum level of provision in education — together with other public services — should be the government's focus, not anti-strike laws. He called on the Labour Party to commit to repealing all Tory anti-strike restrictions that have been put in place since the 1980s.

Aslef general secretary Mick Whelan told the rally that the laws are not about protecting people — they are, he said, "a tool to hurt trade unions, to hurt the

movement”.

RMT general secretary Mick Lynch thanked all the activists at the rally and in the wider movement for “reviving the trade union moment”, adding that we need to proactively “use the right to strike” and not just “protect the right to strike”.

There were also speakers representing sectors that will be affected by the minimum services legislation which threatens to strip the right to strike from thousands of our members in the Home Office.

Trevor Harris, a PCS border security rep, said that members in the Border Force have shown how effective trade union action can be “by smashing the threshold” and “taking targeted and sustained action at airports and seaports across the UK”. The concessions the Border Force won after the national campaign in 2023, he added, came directly as a result of strike action, which is now under threat.

Other workers affected by minimum service levels spoke at the rally along with speakers from the wider trade union movement.

You can [learn more about the GCHQ campaign](#) and [look at our timeline which follows this historic campaign](#) from start to end.