

22 May 2024

GCHQ film premiered at PCS conference fringe meeting

A new film about the success of the campaign against the trade union ban at GCHQ was premiered today (22) at a well-attended fringe meeting.

On 25 January 1984, all Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) workers were ordered to leave their trade unions by 1 March or face dismissal. Those who signed away their rights received a payment of £1,000 less tax.

Over 100 GCHQ workers refused to sign away their union rights, but it wasn't until late 1988 that the government sacked the last 14 workers who were still holding out.

For more than 13 years, this small group of brave GCHQ staff and their unions campaigned for the right to belong to a union, commanding huge support throughout the labour movement. Their principled and sustained campaign ended in 1997, when the new Labour government overturned the ban on unions. Staff at GCHQ are now members of PCS.

Read more about the [GCHQ campaign](#) and look at our [timeline of how it started](#) and what happened when.

Opening up the fringe meeting, PCS senior national officer Paul O'Connor said the march showed an appetite for trade unionists to "learn the lessons of the past". The film, he said before introducing the film, is "above all a tribute to those who stood firm".

'I WON'T SIGN' - the half-hour film commissioned by PCS on the GCHQ union ban - is now available for all to [watch on YouTube](#). It features interviews from a wide range of trade unionists and GCHQ workers who were involved in the high-profile campaign to reverse the union ban.

James from the current GCHQ group said that he "wouldn't be standing here today if it hadn't been for the campaigners and their work keeping the issue in the public eye".

Closing off the meeting after the film received rapturous applause, Brian Johnson, a GCHQ campaigner, said “his work is now in the history books and that it is now up to [trade unionists] today to carry on the fight”.

Earlier in the day, conference [voted to continue campaigning](#) against Minimum Service Levels.

This comes after the march and rally in Cheltenham on 27 January to mark the 40th anniversary of the ban on trade union membership at GCHQ.

At the rally, PCS's then general secretary Mark Serwotka announced that PCS will use the Human Rights Act to challenge the Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Act 2023 on the grounds that the proposed strike restrictions contravene the right to strike enshrined in Article 11 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

In echoes of the GCHQ union ban, the government is seeking to restrict the right to strike for over five million workers through minimum service levels. The legislation threatens to strip the democratic right to strike from hundreds of thousands of workers, including thousands of our members in Border Force and the Passport Office.

Like Thatcher's GCHQ ban of 1984, it's obvious that this crude legislation is designed to limit the effectiveness of trade unions.

Find essential information about the conference on the [ADC 2024 web page](#) and follow our website for further updates throughout the week.