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PCS pledges to fight government as Border Force strike ban considered

PCS has promised to fight tooth and nail attempts by government to place further restrictions on unions' ability to strike following revelations in The Observer that ministers considered banning Border Force workers from taking industrial action.

In echoes of the ban introduced by Margaret Thatcher at GCHQ in 1984, [The Observer has revealed](#) that prime minister Rishi Sunak actively considered banning thousands of workers from joining unions, according to leaked government emails detailing proposals described by our general secretary Mark Serwokta as potentially the "biggest attack on workers' rights and freedoms" for decades. [Mike Grindley, who was renowned across the union movement for leading the fight against the union ban at GCHQ, died last week.](#)

The internal messages, reveal that Sunak seriously contemplated banning Border Force staff from trade union membership under its anti-strike legislation unveiled last Thursday. The extreme measures – not even known to be under active consideration until now – could theoretically have seen more than a million workers banned from joining unions.

Mark said: "These emails reveal that while the government publicly is saying we want to resolve the dispute, behind the scenes they were preparing the biggest attacks on fundamental rights and freedoms that we would have seen in this country for generations."

The leaked emails, drawn up by senior officials and government lawyers in Grant Shapps' Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) and shared last month with senior civil servants, advocated three models that Sunak would choose from to form its anti-strike laws. The first model, described in the emails as a "police service ban on striking" because officers are legally banned from industrial action, advocated "BF [Border Force] staff banned from joining a trade union" with striking or "inciting disaffection" to become a criminal offence.

The internal emails, however, show that the most extreme model - banning workers from trade union membership - was seemingly rejected only because it might “be difficult to justify” because the European Court of Human Rights guaranteed UK workers the [right to join](#) a union. Because of this, senior civil servants felt opting for minimum service levels, announced by the government this week was their “preferred option.”

PCS believes that the fact that Sunak actually considered banning union membership exposes the ruthlessness of his leadership. Although the leaked emails cite only Border Force staff as being banned from joining a union, we believe the restrictions would have been rolled out to other sectors, including border security, health, education, fire, ambulance, rail and nuclear commissioning.

“This current government is even more hardline even than Thatcher’s. Rather than spend any time trying to resolve these disputes the government is actually trying to potentially take what are already the most restrictive anti-union laws in Europe and take them to levels I don’t think anybody thought they would seriously contemplate,” said Mark.

“The government should know that we will fight any proposals to further attack trade unions tooth and nail and with all means at our disposal. The prime minister says he wants to have ‘grown-up’ conversations with unions but imposing further restrictions on unions’ ability to carry out their members’ democratic wishes flies in the face of that. We urge the government to reconsider these draconian measures and enter into meaningful negotiations with us and other public sector unions to resolve the many disputes it has caused.”