

Timeline of GCHQ union ban and campaign

Follow our timeline to see how the GCHQ union ban was imposed by an anti-worker Conservative government and how it was subsequently opposed by brave GCHQ workers with the support of the wider trade union movement.

1981: Civil service strikes affect GCHQ

Margaret Thatcher's government unilaterally abolishes a civil service pay agreement, causing rolling strikes throughout the civil service which reached the GCHQ 'listening centre' network based in Cheltenham. US spy agencies began placing pressure on GCHQ to impose restrictions on trade union freedoms.

25 January 1984: Thatcher imposes ban on trade union membership at GCHQ

Margaret Thatcher's government announced its decision to impose a total ban on trade union membership at GCHQ. The decision came without warning or consultation. What was called General Notice 100/84, the GCHQ Ban, was issued out of the blue to trade union members at 3.15 pm at their desks.

26 January 1984: First protest meeting held by GCHQ staff

Furious and confused trade union members at GCHQ immediately begin discussing the implications of the ban. The figurehead of the campaign, Mike Grindley recalled that – on the day after Thatcher's announcement – the first big protest meeting was held in what was called the Pittville Pump Room.

14 February 1984: Support for GCHQ staff by the TUC (TUC were supportive from day 1)

The general secretary of the TUC at the time, Len Murray, announced the TUC had earmarked £500,000 to support the campaign to oppose the GCHQ union ban.

23 February 1984: Protest at parliament over the GCHQ ban

The day after six GCHQ workers travelled to Tolpuddle to lay a wreath on James Hammett's grave, there was a mass protest at parliament.

Thatcher had told Len Murray and the civil service trade union general secretaries: "There is an inherent conflict between the structure of trade unions

and loyalty to the state”.

Campaigners called this a "warning signal", which became the name of a regular campaign journal, 150 issues of which were published between January 1984 and December 1997.

[27 February 1984: Six-hour debate in House of Commons on the ban](#)

On this date there was a six-hour House of Commons debate on the union ban. The shadow foreign secretary, Denis Healey, told MPs that Thatcher had forced on GCHQ staff “the most damaging conflict of loyalty known to man – loyalty to principle as against loyalty to family”.

[28 February 1984: TUC Day of Action over ban](#)

Ahead of the 1 March deadline for resigning their union membership or facing the sack, the TUC called a Day of Action. According to Labour Research, the vast majority of the government’s 630,000 workers took some form of protest action and the majority went on strike for half or the full day. Many workers in other industries also took supportive protest action.

[1 March 1984: Deadline for GCHQ workers to leave trade unions](#)

After this date, the ban took effect and all GCHQ workers were ordered to leave their trade unions by 1 March 1984 and receive £1,000 (less tax) in supposed compensation or face dismissal. Access to industrial tribunals was also banned.

Initially 130 GCHQ workers refused to sign away their union rights, building to nearly 300 after the win in the High Court. By 1988 only 14 were left.

[5 March 1984: Foundation of the GCHQ campaign group](#)

The campaign group ‘GCHQ Trade Unions’ was formed at a meeting held in Cheltenham’s Park Place Hotel to fight the ban.

[14 April 1984: Motion submitted to House of Commons](#)

A motion was submitted to the House of Commons titled “Tolpuddle Martyrs and Independent Trade Unions” by Neil Kinnock (Labour Party leader) and signed by the majority of the opposition front bench.

It linked the first known petition in support of the Tolpuddle Martyrs to the House of Commons (from 14 April 1834) to the struggle of GCHQ workers to restore “their fundamental liberty to be members of a free, independent trade union”.

[2 June 1984: International Labour Organisation condemns the ban](#)

The Committee of Freedom of Association of the United Nations International Labour Organisation (ILO) issued their Geneva report condemning the GCHQ trade union ban as contravening the ILO's most central Convention No. 87 on Freedom of Association and Protections of the Right to Organise. In nearly every year afterwards during the union ban's application, the ILO repeated its condemnation of the government's actions.

[16 July 1984: High Court rules that ban is invalid](#)

GCHQ workers welcomed a judgment by a High Court Judicial Review which stated: "The union ban at GCHQ is invalid and of no effect"; and that to have acted without consultation with staff or union representatives was "a breach of fairness and the rules of natural justice". Hundreds of staff re-joined in the following few weeks.

[6 August 1984: Court of Appeal overturns High Court decision](#)

The Court of Appeal Judgement overturned the High Court decision. The Lord Chief Justice Lane and two other judges ruled in favour of the government for unspecified reasons of "national security".

[3 September 1985: TUC conference reaffirms full support for GCHQ workers](#)

At its annual conference, the TUC unanimously supported a motion reaffirming TUC policy to call a day of action if any worker at GCHQ is dismissed for being a trade union member.

GCHQ trade unionists, including those who rejoined the movement after the ban on membership at the GCHQ was briefly lifted, were given a heroes' welcome at the congress. It also gave unanimous backing to a motion promising full support, including financial assistance to civil service unions in their campaign to pursue their complaints of unfair discrimination through the European court.

[October 1984: Widespread support from colleagues across the world](#)

By early October, nearly 800 organisations had written to the GCHQ trade unions group, assuring their practical, moral or financial support. Senders included major unions and union confederations in places such as Australia, Belgium, Bermuda, Ghana, Guyana, Ireland, Israel, Malaysia, and Poland.

[9 August 1985: Mass walk-outs in response to government threats](#)

After months of threats of disciplinary action by the government to members if they did not leave their unions, this date was seen as the most serious threat of dismissals yet, resulting in mass walkouts across the civil service.

[14 March 1986: Further walkouts in response to government threats](#)

The government told trade union members they were either “to be prematurely retired on redundancy terms” or (in some cases) to be posted elsewhere. Rejoined members were again given 10 days to leave their unions or face disciplinary proceedings.

After massive walk outs across the civil service, they all spurned what Mike Grindley called “kangaroo courts”. Sir Geoffrey Howe stated that dismissals were “not appropriate”.

[20 January 1987: Ban prevented from being taken to European Court of Human Rights](#)

The European Commission of Human Rights in Strasbourg ruled that the civil service unions' argument was 'manifestly ill-founded' and that the claim that the ban was a breach of the right to free association for the 7,000 staff at GCHQ, was 'inadmissible', blocking the Council of Civil Service Unions - which had been fighting the government since the ban was announced in 1984 - from taking the case to the European Court of Human Rights for a full judgment.

[7-8 May 1987: Two-day strike over pay by some GCHQ workers](#)

A number of GCHQ Society of Civil and Public Servants (SCPS) branch members supported the two-day official all-out strike over the civil service pay dispute.

[8-9 June 1987: More strikes by GCHQ workers](#)

The same SCPS branch members went on a second official two-day strike over the civil service pay dispute.

In response, the government sent them written disciplinary charges. This is believed to be the first time that discipline charges have ever been instituted by a British government against its civil servants for taking official strike action. All 11 strikers wrote back totally rejecting the charges and demanding they be withdrawn.

[7 November 1988: Second GCHQ Day sees mass support for campaign](#)

The second “GCHQ Day” took place in response to imminent sackings.

Grindley addressed 2,800 inside the Methodist Central Hall in London, with 2,000 more outside. There were over 70 rallies across the country, while over 80% of NUCPS, CPSA and NIPSA took strike action. NALGO broke the law and held official strike action. All sorts of secondary strike action was also taken by Yorkshire miners, teachers, and isolated industrial workers groups.

[18 November 1988: First sackings of GCHQ trade unionists](#)

The first four sackings of GCHQ members took place. Among those who were sacked on this date were Mike Grindley and Alan Rowland. These sackings were followed by ten more during December and into the spring of 1989. The fourteen sacked employees were Graham Hughes, Brian Johnson, Robin Smith, Gerry O'Hagan, Dee Goddard, Clive Lloyd, Allan Chambers, Bill Bickham, John Cook, Harry Underwood, Roy Taylor, and Gareth Morris.

[30 November 1988: Industrial action in civil service in response to sackings](#)

In response to the government's decision to dismiss trade unionists at GCHQ, civil servants throughout the country took industrial action. In Cardiff, 400 staff at Companies House refused to work. They were joined by some of the 4,000 civil servants at the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Centre in Swansea after a lunchtime union meeting.

Government departments in Coventry and Warwickshire were paralysed by strike action involving about 1,200 staff at benefit offices, Jobcentres, and social services departments. National Union of Civil and Public Servants, (NUCPS, one of PCS's predecessors unions) said the strike demonstrated the strength of feeling still felt among members about an issue now five years old.

[9 April 1992: Lib Dem wins safe Tory seat in Cheltenham](#)

In a clear indication of the anger in Cheltenham, the 1991 general election saw a shock result, with Liberal Democrat Nigel Jones winning a Conservative safe seat, becoming the first Liberal to represent Cheltenham for more than 80 years. He campaigned against the GCHQ ban and in his maiden speech in parliament, he repeated his own commitment to the restoration of trade union rights at GCHQ.

Labour lost the election which dashed hopes of an early return of trade union rights to GCHQ.

[20 December 1993: John Major reiterates government commitment to ban](#)

In response to political and international pressure, eventually agreeing to talks with the unions after years of silence, Prime Minister John Major refused to lift the ban on trade union membership, repeating Thatcher's line to civil service union leaders that there was a "conflict of interest" with loyalty to the state and union membership.

[1 May 1997: General election takes place](#)

By the time of the general election in 1997, GCHQ trade unions had collected 41 pledges from different politicians in the Labour Party. Labour won a landslide victory, giving hope that the ban would be ended and trade union freedoms reinstated at GCHQ.

[14 May 1997: End of ban announced at union conference](#)

The announcement of the lifting of the ban was made at the Public Services, Tax and Commerce Union (predecessor of PCS) conference in Blackpool on 14 May 1997, with the official announcement being made by foreign secretary Robin Cook the day after.

[15 May 1997: Labour ends GCHQ union ban after election](#)

Two weeks after Labour swept into power, the new foreign secretary, Robin Cook, officially made the announcement: "I can announce that the conditions of service of staff at GCHQ have today been changed, they once again have the freedom they previously enjoyed to join any trade union they choose."

"We are elated," Mike Grindley told the Independent after the announcement, "people in GCHQ are already wearing union badges."

"It's been a mixture of tenseness, tiredness, excitement and endurance," he continued. "We always knew in our heart of hearts that we would win our rights back, but if we had been told it would take 13 years, the prospect would have been daunting indeed."

[23 July 1997: GCHQ workers vote to join PCS](#)

Government Communications Staff Federation (GCSF) members vote in a ballot to join PCS.

[25 July 1997: March back into GCHQ signals end of campaign](#)

A symbolic “march back into GCHQ” took place, with 10 of the 14 of the original sacked staff present. Many trade union leaders were there to support the march into GCHQ.

By the time trade unions proudly marched back into GCHQ, much had changed. The staff federation had voted to join what is now PCS as the officially recognised union. Members were offered their jobs back and had their pensions restored as if they’d never been sacked. After so long only three of those sacked were young enough and able to make it back into mainstream employment inside GCHQ.