

government had lied about the sinking of the Argentine warship *General Belgrano* during the 1982 Falklands War.

Although Ponting had resigned his FDA membership the previous year, the Executive Committee felt the issue at stake was so important he was readmitted to membership on payment of his back subscriptions.

“If they’d just dismissed him for gross misconduct, he wouldn’t have had a leg to stand on,” Ward says. “What really got FDA members furious was using the Official Secrets Act because the government had been embarrassed. This was a complete misuse of the Act against one of our members and we were determined to resist it.”

A potential deal, under which Ponting would resign but avoid criminal prosecution, was scuppered at the last minute by Defence Minister John Stanley, who insisted the prosecution go ahead. The FDA, along with the Campaign for Freedom of Information, to which the union had recently affiliated, sponsored Ponting’s defence fund. He was acquitted on 11 February 1985, when the jury ignored a direction from the judge and accepted Ponting’s argument that he had acted in the national interest.

“I had to go to do *Newsnight* with Clive that night,” Ward recalls. “It was a classic case of the FDA benefiting in terms of publicity from these high-profile events where the civil service was under attack. The media really wanted to talk to a Permanent

Right: A banner at a march in 1984, declaring the FDA’s support for GCHQ staff being refused trade union rights.



1984

The government bans staff at GCHQ from being members of the FDA or other trade unions, starting a 13-year campaign to restore these employee rights.

Secretary, but of course there’s no way they could do something like this, so the next best thing was to go the General Secretary of the FDA.”

GCHQ: the campaign – and strikes - to restore union rights

On 25 January 1984, the government banned staff at the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) from belonging to an independent trade union, leading to the FDA’s longest-running dispute with the government. The decision is widely seen as having been taken under pressure from the US authorities, who had been alarmed by disruption to GCHQ’s

work during the 1981 strike.

GCHQ staff were told nothing about this blatant violation of their human rights until Foreign Secretary Geoffrey Howe was already on his feet announcing the move to the House of Commons. Then FDA General Secretary John Ward was told just ten minutes before. The FDA’s GCHQ Branch described the ban as “arbitrary and brutal” and reported that some non-members had demonstrated their strength of feeling by defiantly joining up. Thousands of FDA members took part in a half-day strike on 28 February in protest against the ban.

The FDA GCHQ Branch Secretary, Mike King (see boxout of page 17), was one of a handful

1984

The GCHQ refusenik: Mike King

At 3pm on 25 January 1984, the FDA's Branch Secretary at GCHQ, Mike King, was handed a brown envelope. "It was a letter, just like everybody else's, telling me what had happened, and that Geoffrey Howe was addressing the Commons at the moment," he recalls.

Like thousands of other GCHQ staff, King was forced to choose between signing away his trade union rights, a transfer to another department or dismissal. "When we came in the next morning, the first thing I did was to tell [my staff], 'I've made up my mind: I'm not signing, I'm leaving'," he recalls. "They were so relieved they'd got someone they could talk to. People were saying things like, 'I don't know what to do, I've got children at school here, my wife works here, and what if they move me to East Kilbride?'"

After getting over the "shock and disbelief", the FDA branch "just took a deep breath and agreed we should not do anything precipitous," King says. "The unions decided fairly early on they would not ask people at GCHQ to come

out on strike – that would only make the Government's point for them."

After refusing to agree to the new terms, King was transferred to the Treasury before moving to the Science and Engineering Research Council for several years. He was one of the handful of 'refuseniks' who returned to GCHQ

when the ban was lifted in 1997.

"I rang them up and said: 'The Government says I can have a job, so give us a job'. It took a while, but as vacancies came up we were told: 'If you want it, you can have it'. But the whole business had moved on and it was a very different job to what I'd been doing before."



Above: Then FDA GCHQ Branch Secretary Mike King (second left, wearing a black hat) with colleagues at a rally in 1985.

of members who refused to accept the new terms, or the government's £1,000 inducement to surrender their rights.

Welcomed to the FDA's 1984 conference with a highly unusual standing ovation, King told delegates that "what has happened has been a tragedy. Not just for GCHQ... but for the whole relationship between the government and the governed... Whatever noises the Government makes about the way civil service trade unions have behaved, it pales into nothing compared with the Government's behaviour towards its own staff."

The FDA and other civil service unions held two rounds of face-to-face talks with the Prime Minister, brokered by the TUC.

The unions believed they were close to agreeing a compromise, including a no-strike deal at GCHQ, only for Mrs Thatcher to harden her position at the last minute.

"Of course, it was quite difficult to get a word in edgeways," Ward recalls of the second meeting. "But I said, Prime Minister, can I just be clear what you're saying? Even if we have a no-strike agreement, you're saying it's not what they *do* but what they *are* which is unacceptable? And she said, her exact words were: 'Mr. Ward, I think we have a gap here which cannot be bridged by words.'"

The unions tried to get the ban overturned in the courts. Although Lord Justice Glidewell

ruled in July 1984 that the order banning the GCHQ unions was invalid, the Court of Appeal and the House of Lords subsequently ruled in favour of the Government.

The FDA continued to play a vociferous role throughout the 13-year campaign to restore trade union rights at GCHQ. "The campaign united the civil service unions and the TUC – quite something in itself – and kept the issue high up the political agenda, particularly with the opposition parties," says Ward. The ban was finally overturned by the incoming Labour government in May 1997, allowing a number of 'refuseniks' – including Mike King – to return to work at GCHQ as union members. ■