

I.L.O. Condemns U.K. Govn.

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SCEPTICISM ABROAD AS THATCHER GOVN. WITHDRAWS FROM CONVENTION

The government's threats during the rail strikes to introduce legislation to further curtail public sector employees' rights to strike will increase international scepticism over its attitude towards human rights.

The UK is a signatory to the International Labour Organisation's many conventions on human and employment rights. The ILO is an internationally recognised body which was set up along with the League of Nations under the Versailles Treaty in 1919. Like the League of Nations (now the UN) the ILO has no real power and its conventions do not have the force of law, but its membership of some 150 nations means that a government can flaunt the conventions only at the risk of losing international respectability.

At the end of April the ILO issued a statement claiming that the UK government had breached international employment conventions on no less than eight different counts. One of the most serious and flagrant violations relates to the government's treatment of workers at GCHQ.

In another case, the Teacher's Pay and Conditions Act - which abolished negotiating machinery for determining teachers' pay, was declared to be a breach of Convention 151 on labour relations in public services. In a

curious turn of phrase the government describes "negotiating" and decision-making as now being "unilateral".

The government's favorite means of avoiding trouble from the ILO is to make use of a loophole in the machinery of the conventions. If its deliberate flaunting of labour rights becomes too extreme it simply withdraws from the relevant convention. Thus, since GCHQ, it is no longer signatory to certain right to strike conventions. A government spokesman replying to the ILO's accusations concerning the Teacher's Pay Act said, in June last year, "... the government has full confidence in the impartiality and integrity of the ILO, but they are wrong in this particular case." He added that "... discussions with the Civil Service Unions would serve no useful purpose".

The 1988 Employment Act was found to be in breach of the requirements of Convention 87 as regards freedom of association. Most of this act came into force on July 26th last year.

Other attacks on workers' and trade unionists' rights have been presented as moves to give power back to grass roots trade unionists, or even as improvements in training opportunities. The Employment Training scheme, originally a low-paid training programme has been transformed by social security regulations into an American-style work-for-dole programme.

Deregulation has reduced employees' statutory rights, particularly for women, part-time workers and workers in small firms. According to one estimate the extension in the qualifying periods for unfair dismissal relating to small businesses has resulted in 300,000 women losing their employment rights under existing law.

Alex Barren

Cheap labour brings down the unemployment figures

