

Britain: Protests continue against closure of Abbeydale Grange secondary school

Robert Stevens
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Parents, pupils and staff protested outside the Town Hall in Sheffield, South Yorkshire, on July 17 to oppose the closure of Abbeydale Grange School. On July 8 the Liberal Democrat-led Sheffield City Council cabinet voted to close Abbeydale Grange, a school with 600 pupils and 90 staff.

The operation will begin immediately, with a view to closure in August 2010. Only the remaining Year 11 students are to stay until final closure in July 2011.

About 75 people attended the demonstration, with many holding placards reading “Say No to closing Abbeydale Grange—Schools Not Houses.” This refers to the suspicion that a central factor in the council’s decision to close is that it will be able to sell off the 51 acres of prime building land the school and its grounds occupy.

A number of slogans were chanted, including “Save Our School,” “Schools not Houses,” and “Schools not Tesco’s.” Several people spoke at the protest, including the school’s community liaison manager, Ibrar Hussain, and a learning mentor, Colleen Smith.

The Socialist Equality Party distributed a leaflet, “Save Abbeydale Grange School! Mobilise against Sheffield City Council’s closure threat.” It called on staff and pupils to “continue to oppose the closure and join with parents, ex-pupils and other workers in doing so.”

It explained, “Since coming to power the Labour government has closed more than 1,700 schools. Between 2002 and 2008, some 1,704 schools—primary and secondary—were closed in England. Figures released in 2008 found that schools are being closed at a rate of nearly one a day.”

Drawing attention to the issue of the possible profit from the sale of Abbeydale Grange’s land, it noted that

“Figures released last year under the Freedom of Information Act found that local authorities have sold off land worth £236 million since 1997. Already 298 sites of former schools have been sold off. Another 188 sites have been earmarked for sale.”

The statement placed the proposed closure of the school in the context of the large-scale cuts currently being imposed by Sheffield City Council—“£6 million from its property improvement programme” alone: “Last month, the council’s audit committee revealed the council’s debt was £1 billion.”

The leaflet condemned the role of the trade unions, the “NASUWT, NUT, UNISON and GMB, which have made no attempt whatsoever to oppose Abbeydale Grange’s closure or to protect the jobs of their members ... a genuine campaign to save the school from closure must base itself on a socialist defence of education for all, in a struggle against the ethos of the market. It must be conducted in spite of and against the complicity of the trade unions”.

Ibrar Hussain, the school’s community liaison manager and a senior teacher, thanked all those present at the demonstration for attending despite the rainy conditions and commended the Socialist Equality Party for its support in opposing the school’s closure.

Learning mentor Colleen Smith said, “The council have engineered a *fait accompli* and we should not accept their rationale for closing this school down. We can’t rely on anybody else to save our school except our actions—the actions of parents, teachers and the community.”

Cath Baker is the vice chairwoman of the Forging Links with Abbeydale Grange School group (Flags)—the school’s parent-teacher association. She told the *World Socialist Web Site* that four of her children went to the school. “Abbeydale Grange is a

multi-cultural school. It specialises in encouraging and supporting children who don't have English as their first language. It is an absolute travesty that the council is determined to close it. They will not listen to the passion of the staff, the ex-pupils."

The school "had been given no time to find a federation partner," Cath continued. "There has been a process that has been completely dishonest. Parents have not been listened to. With the outcome of the 'focus groups,' closure was never mentioned. A 'soft federation' was the option but closure was never on the cards. But that's been the one option all the time.

"We will carry on our fight, we are not giving up. We don't want to see housing, or a Tesco's supermarket on this site. We are under no illusions that this is a very likely outcome for the school and we know already that a feasibility study has been carried out on the land before the decision for closure was even taken.

"Education, Education, Education [Labour's 1997 election campaign slogan] means nothing, it seems to me, because they are eroding away all the time the schools that are really good. I believe that each community should have its own secondary school that is valued and used. If Abbeydale Grange closes the other schools in the area, which are already oversubscribed, will end up having much bigger classes. So children whose parents have fought to get them into those schools as their preference will find that they are going to end up in schools with much larger classes.

"We are fighting for Abbeydale Grange, but I agree with you. We are fighting for all our children to have the best education we can."

Ibrar Hussain explained, "I have been 23 wonderful years at Abbeydale Grange School and I feel very passionately about saving my school. I know the worth of the school for the community and for the whole of Sheffield.

"I believe closure is a political decision by local government and they have been on our backs, I would say for the last 10 or 12 years. Every year we have fought off closure, every year we have proved them wrong and every year we have done things and got better and better.

"Unfortunately we now have Sonia Sharp, who is the executive director of Children's Services in Sheffield.

She is saying we have had the Ofsted [Office for Standards in Education Children's Services] report and for the first time ever they have put us in 'special measures' and said we needed to improve.

"And we are the first school that, after having been put in special measures, has shown improvement immediately. ... My personal opinion is that we should never have been there in the first place.

"We know only too well that we sit on 52 acres of leafy, suburban land in the south west. I have now, at the moment, some parents who are looking into the deeds of the school because we feel that this is a land grab situation. I think that is the ulterior motive. The land is absolutely wonderful and there are already lots and lots of rumours surfacing that the land is something they are after.

"We've been in discussions with local residents where they have been telling us about discussions to do with selling the land off to private developers for flats, luxury houses and they don't want to see this happen and would much rather the school remained."

Chris Hanlon, 19, said, "I attended the school until 2006 and then went to college and came back here to the school as a drama technician. My contract is up now, but I'm still passionate about the school.

"My personal opinion is that the land is far more valuable to them than the education of the students. I think it's ridiculous that they want to shut down the school. We might be a small school, but this school has got the biggest heart in Sheffield. We're not going to go down without a fight. All these people you see here today are pupils, ex-pupils, parents and teachers."



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