

Britain: Glasgow primary schools blockaded and occupied by parents

Steve James
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Parents, children, their friends and supporters have blockaded two Glasgow primary schools scheduled for closure. They are seeking to prevent the city council's education department from removing furniture and educational material.

Wyndford and St. Gregory's primary schools are among 22 primary schools and nurseries that the Labour administration of Glasgow City Council intends to close, despite massive public hostility. Both schools were occupied for a fortnight in April, during the Easter break, in protest against the city council's proposals. Wyndford school has now been re-occupied.

The standoff outside Wyndford and St. Gregory's took place at the end of the school term. Until Friday June 26, the popular schools had been functioning as normal. Early the next morning, the authorities drove a fleet of empty hired vans into the school grounds into which desks, tables and gym material were loaded by up to 20 contractors. Up to 20 parents from the extensive Wyndford housing estate and the nearby Gairbraid area, along with supporters from across the city, responded by setting up a picket line at the school gate to prevent the vans from leaving.

A standoff ensued for the next few hours. Both police and the city council's security staff were called. In the end, the vans were unloaded again and driven out empty. All were confirmed empty before being allowed to depart.

Alison Kelly, one of the parents involved in the Wyndford and St Gregory United campaign, explained, "Today we are having a blockade of the school gates to stop the council bringing white vans to take away all the educational material, the furniture, out of our two schools. We're stopping the vans from leaving, and therefore stopping all the furniture and materials

coming out of the school. We are going through a legal review at the moment, and we don't want them [the council] saying, 'Well it's not a school anymore, it's just a building, it's just a shell.' So we want to keep the materials in the school.

"These vans have been organised for a long time. I would say they were organised before the consultation period. The consultation is going to be proved an absolute scam. It's part of the legal legwork that they had to go through. But we are saying that the campaign is going on. This community is not going to stand for the schools being shut down. We are not moving. We have eight to ten parents occupying Wyndford Primary and they are going to be there for as long as it takes."

Colette James, also a parent, explained why she was taking part: "If they are not going to put the money in to educate them, they are not going to get jobs," she said. "As far as I am concerned, they are depriving these kids of a job already and we are not being given a choice in the matter. There are four schools in Maryhill in a four- or five-mile radius. They are shutting them all down. The other closures are spread throughout Glasgow.

"I'm a single parent with three kids. One's just moved to nursery school, one to primary. They both start at 9 o'clock. Now, the primary school is just a stone's throw away from the nursery. But how am I supposed to get to two places at the one time if the primary school is mile and half away?

"There is no compromise. There are no buses. There are buses if you go to the schools they are telling you to go to, but I want my child to get a good education, so I am going to send him to the one with the smallest class sizes."

Colette pointed out the hypocrisy of the Labour Party's claims to be concerned with lowering class

sizes: “One of the things that is being said, but it might not be true, is that within three or four years all the schools that are being closed will be replaced by brand new schools, although they might have to merge. But Wyndford and St. Gregory’s don’t have that choice. They’re not getting anything rebuilt.

“Labour can make and break rules. They say you can’t have class sizes over 30. But then they close down these schools and make class sizes over 30. It’s not even a proper class. All they are doing is putting a partition in a classroom. How are the kids supposed to concentrate?”

Jean Cowan said, “I’ve got a granddaughter at this school, Ellen. I think it’s awful that they are doing this. There is no need to do it. They spent £10,000 re-roofing part of the school. Why? This was in May. The first time they occupied it, the scaffolding was up. They were putting part of the roof on. We all think they have another plan for the building.

“You can put a community centre there, but what’s the difference if there are no schools? People are moving out. If you are a young couple and you are going to have a family, the first thing you look for in an area is whether there are schools to hand. It’s OK if you have a car, but a lot of people here don’t have cars.”

Anne Muir, a supporter of the campaign, noted some of the issues facing workers in the schools. “The office staff and the teachers have all been treated appallingly,” she said. “They haven’t been backed up by their unions. If they don’t accept the jobs they are given, then they don’t have work. Office staff that work 30 or 35 hours have to take a job with 15 or even 10 hours. So they are being told their hours are being reduced or they haven’t got work. This is not just an issue about how Glasgow City Council treats the people who elected them. It’s also about how they treat their employees.

“The education services have a mission statement with a set of values, and their mission says, ‘Trust, Justice, Respect, Integrity and Wisdom.’ I would ask them if they have actually read their mission statement. We cannot trust them, because they have lied to us. They have misrepresented us. They have not acted with wisdom because taking away two schools from this community is not a wise thing to do. It will not regenerate an area. There is no justice in this decision.

They have previously offered a nondenominational school (St. Gregory’s is a Catholic School) in the St. Gregory’s building, but they have reneged on that. Integrity? I don’t think they know the meaning of the word.”

Since Saturday, the city council have made more efforts to strip materials from the schools. Two more vans turned up on Monday morning to remove photocopiers and office equipment and were again turned away by parents. On Tuesday, in a vindictive move entirely in line with the city council’s approach, two council staff attended the school pretending to be searching for a “gas leak.” They cut off the water supply to the rooms used by the campaigners.

A Glasgow City Council spokesman responded to the protests with measureless contempt. “The protest is futile, because the school is closed and will remain closed,” he declared.



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