

Glasgow school closures campaign at an impasse

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7 July 2009

An occupation and picket has been mounted to prevent the closure of Wyndford Primary school in Maryhill, Glasgow, by the city's Labour Party council. The occupation, the second at the school in three months, comes at the end of several months of campaigns and protests by parents, teachers and pupils against the closure of 22 schools and nurseries across the city. Officially, all of them closed their doors for the last time June 26.

The closures are part of a rationalisation programme that seeks to concentrate pupils into fewer schools, part of council efforts to save some £20 million out of an annual budget of £2.4 billion while retaining reserves of £144 million. Additional funding is being directed to the 2014 Commonwealth Games.

Only £3 million annually will be saved by the school closures. The city council is reported to be considering more school closures. The *Sunday Herald* on April 26 suggested that a further 34 schools were under threat.

The council has justified the closures on the grounds of falling school rolls, yet its own figures predict a three percent increase in the total number of primary children by 2018. Previous policy commitments to reduce class sizes have been thrown out.

The closure plans have generated high levels of opposition, with many thousands of parents, children and their supporters demonstrating. Wyndford Primary and neighbouring St. Gregory's Primary were occupied during the Easter holidays. Rooftop protests and occupations also took place at Ruchill Primary, Our Lady of the Assumption Primary and Victoria Primary. Ninety-seven percent of 8,000 submissions to the city council opposed the closure plans. None of this had any impact on the council, which voted April 23 to continue with the closure programme.

The Save our Schools (SoS) campaign is now at an impasse, and the reasons for this must be understood if the

threatened schools are to be defended.

SoS is led by the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP), whose Ritchie Venton is the SoS organiser. The SSP support Scottish independence and claim that the creation of a Scottish state based on a population of just five million can provide a basis for decent living standards for all.

Rather than lead a determined and principled campaign in the working class, Venton and the SSP have led opponents of the school closures up a succession of blind alleys based on appeals to the Labour Party, the Scottish National Party and the trade union bureaucracy.

The SSP hoped that protests and stunts would combine with calculations over Labour's electoral prospects to weigh heavily on Labour councillors concerned with defending their seats. Many of the campaign slogans of SoS were directed against Labour leader Steven Purcell—described as an “axeman”. But Purcell only embodies the transformation of the Labour Party as a whole into a tool of the financial elite and its local agents in the banks, private companies and investment agencies.

Although the SSP concede that Labour is a right-wing party, the SSP has conducted the SoS protests in the framework of its manoeuvres around a dwindling band of supposedly more left-wing councillors.

The SSP take the same attitude to the trade union bureaucracy. Writing in April on the SoS Web site following a visit to the Scottish Trade Union Congress (STUC) conference, Venton claimed, “We won massive support from several trade unions who recognise that the cuts in staffing levels, rise in class sizes, threats to parents' ability to hold down jobs, and assault on community facilities are all issues that trade unionists should take up”.

In reality, not a single trade union has lifted a finger to defend the schools, including the teaching unions, of which the Educational Institute for Scotland (EIS) is the largest, and the huge local government and public service

unions, Unison and Unite. The SSP oppose any assessment of the transformation of the unions into appendages of corporate and local government management.

Secondly, as in all their activities, the SSP have used the schools campaigns to boost the authority and left credentials of the devolved Scottish parliament in Holyrood, Edinburgh, established by Labour in 1999. The SSP present Holyrood as more responsive to the needs of working people than Westminster. It also depicts the capitalist Scottish National Party (SNP) as more left-wing than the Labour Party and as key allies in the supposedly progressive struggle for independence.

Following Glasgow City Council's endorsement of the closure programme, SoS organised a demonstration outside Holyrood, bussing parents from Glasgow for the event. The purpose of the exercise was to elicit a friendly gesture and statement or two from SNP or Labour MSPs (members of the Scottish parliament). Few were forthcoming.

Both the SNP and the Labour Party are equally hostile to the working class. The Scottish government, under first Labour and now the SNP, have been able to posture as marginally more left-wing only because of the more generous funding arrangements handed to Scotland by Westminster, in contrast to the poorer regions of England and Wales.

This has allowed the SNP to endorse a number of elementary social measures not available in England, such as free personal care for elderly people.

However, the SNP and Labour work closely together on issues such as education spending. Scottish education is funded by grants handed from the Scottish government to local authorities. In 2008, the minority SNP government in Edinburgh signed a “concordat” with local authorities to give temporarily increased levels of funding in return for councils freezing council tax payments—a 2007 SNP election pledge. Part of the deal was that local authorities had more freedom to reorganise their spending.

Such residual funding largesse will not continue. Under proposals made by the Calman Commission, established by the UK government, Scotland would get a smaller block grant from Westminster and be able to vary income and other taxes raised in Scotland by 10 percent. In this way, the Scottish elite can cut taxes and social spending in line with their own investment strategy, which is based on closing the gap with Ireland's 10-12.5 percent tax rate on business.

The third aspect of SSP policy is the emphasis placed on

“community” protests. Despite SoS ostensibly coordinating protests from the different areas where schools were threatened, protests have been largely localised. Parents have been summoned to this or that demonstration or fun day on the basis solely of defending their own school.

No conference or event seeking to broaden and deepen a struggle for public education has been organised. Yet there are education cuts and protests against them taking place across Britain. In addition, there are large numbers of disputes in further education, in which university lecturers and students are seeking to oppose redundancies and the slashing of the further education curriculum.

Nursery, primary, secondary and further education—along with crucial cultural resources such as libraries—are all under threat at the same time and from the same source.

The British financial elite and its parties are embarked on a campaign to gut everything on which the working class depends. This is their response to the deepening economic crisis of British and world capitalism.

It is impossible to defend public education on a piecemeal basis of opposing the closure of this or that school or nursery. Notwithstanding their devastating local impact, none of these closures are “local” issues. They are all driven by international trends and events. Still less can education be defended on the basis of expressions of outrage directed against representatives of the financial elite. Rather, the working class must undertake a united struggle for the socialist reorganisation of society under its own political leadership.



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