

Britain: Oppose the closure of Abbeydale Grange! Defend public education for all!

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On Saturday November 21 up to 150 parents, pupils, staff and supporters from Abbeydale Grange School in Sheffield, South Yorkshire, England marched to oppose its proposed closure.

The march was called by the FLAGS parent-teacher organisation (Forging Links with Abbeydale Grange). A number of speakers addressed the rally, including the prospective Labour Party and Green Party candidates for Sheffield Central for the 2010 General Election; Paula Hunter, a parent with a Year Eight special needs child at the school; David Smith, the interim head teacher, and Professor John Coldron, the chair of the school governors.

Colleen Smith, a learning mentor and leading member of the Socialist Equality Party, spoke at the protest, as did the school's community liaison manager and senior teacher, Ibrar Hussain. (See accompanying video)

On December 9, the Liberal Democrat-controlled Sheffield City Council will take the final decision on closure, following a three-month "consultation" process. The consultation has been a sham, designed to give the illusion of a democratic decision while the council steps ahead with its agenda of cost-cutting and privatisation of the education system.

The planned closure of the school confronts pupils, families and staff at the school and broader sections of the population with the need to mobilise independent political opposition to the social policies imposed by the Labour Party at a national level, and supported by the Conservative and Liberal Democrats at the local level.

The targeting of schools such as Abbeydale is entirely consistent with Labour's restructuring of the education system over the last decade. Schools whose intake represent the most impoverished and disadvantaged layers have been vilified and humiliated through a raft of inspection measures and the publication of league tables which result invariably in poorer schools being labelled "failing."

For the government, no alternatives are conceivable other than closure of these schools or handing them over to the private sector. Those who take these schools over get

lucrative government grants, but the record shows that they provide sub-standard schooling for working class children.

Abbeydale Grange is a diverse school with some 100 nationalities represented in its intake. It has a deserved reputation for welcoming children from families who have come to Britain to escape persecution and those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. A significant number of children begin their first ever experience of formal education at the school at age eleven or older, having come from war-torn areas. Inevitably, this brings with it challenges that other schools in the area do not face.

The Refugee Council of Britain works with the school and has put in a submission supporting Abbeydale against closure. It says, "Our research has shown that schools can be reluctant to admit pupils newly arrived with limited English language skills due to concerns around achievement and the impact on overall grades. Our experience has been that Abbeydale Grange has welcomed those who come to school with English language needs, often having experienced severely disrupted education, and has worked to help them achieve ... We believe that they undertake excellent work to support some of the most vulnerable children."

The school's excellent work means nothing to the local council or the government. The closure of Abbeydale is the result of targets set as part of the National Challenge that the Labour government launched in June 2008. This programme targeted 638 schools where less than 30 percent of pupils achieve at least five GCSE's grade A-C, including Maths and English.

Abbeydale Grange is one of ten schools in Sheffield given an ultimatum. The government told them to change their GCSE [General Certificate of Secondary Education] results by 2011 or face closure, merger or being handed over to the private sector. Abbeydale's 2009 GCSE results were the 7th highest-improved results amongst Sheffield schools. This was a remarkable achievement, but it will have no impact on the decision.

The National Challenge is a covert attempt to boost the role of the private sector in education. Central government

claims that local authorities are not intervening fast enough into “underperforming schools.” But the real source of the problem is that schools like Abbeydale are starved of funds. Educational success has been enshrined in schools that serve wealthy areas at the expense of those in poorer areas. Funding formulas favour schools in richer areas.

Social inequality is a key determinant in educational attainment. Numerous studies confirming this have been ignored by the government. Abbeydale Grange has the highest level of poverty in Sheffield. More than 40 percent of its pupils cannot afford school meals. To compare schools such as Abbeydale with those in more affluent areas without factoring in the impact that social disadvantage has on educational attainment becomes a self-filling prophecy of failure.

The council claims that by closing the school and dispersing children across Sheffield, attainment levels will be increased. They refuse to answer exactly how this to be achieved. Schools in the southwest of Sheffield are already oversubscribed, with class sizes of well over 30. Furthermore, the expertise which has been built up over many years within the school will be lost, with pupils and staff dispersed throughout the city.

Turning Abbeydale into an academy school does not offer an alternative. Some 200 academy schools have been set up by the Labour government, with the aim of a further 200 by the end of next year. So disastrous has this policy been that the government was recently forced to stop the largest sponsor of academies, the United Learning Trust (ULT), from taking over any more schools.

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ULT is an Anglican charity chaired by the former Conservative education minister Angela Rumbold and includes the former archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Carey, on its board. ULT currently runs 17 schools. Labour Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families Ed Balls has had to insist that it improve educational standards.

Four of the 200 academies have been placed in special measures. Inspectors found seven of ULT’s academies to be merely “satisfactory” and two were deemed “inadequate.”

A letter signed by Vernon Croaker, schools minister, cites two failing Sheffield academies as a reason for freezing new projects. Nevertheless, Croaker has words of praise for ULT for its “bold and courageous” decision to take on schools with “high percentages of students with free school meals and special needs.” There are no similar words of encouragement for the staff of Abbeydale or the thousands of teachers in the public sector who take on such tasks day in, day out. The government has created the academies to off-load poorer schools to charity and the private sector. It is

relinquishing any commitment to the education of a large section of working class children—the most deprived and socially disadvantaged.

All the academies get sizeable government grants. Two other Sheffield academies, Sheffield Park and its sister school Sheffield Springs, got £50 million between them. They are now in special measures. Sheffield Park, known as Waltheof when it was a state school, was making good progress before it was turned into a private academy. The handouts that have been given to private academies reproduce on a smaller scale the bank bailout. It is part of a state transfer of wealth from the poorest layers of society to the richest.

In this context, the proposal advanced by the governors and supported by some of the parents and staff at Abbeydale for the school to become a Co-operative Trust, in a desperate attempt to oppose closure, must be opposed. The Co-op has responded to the government’s calls for private companies and trusts to come forward to meet their target in building 200 further academies and trusts by announcing that they aim to establish a network to take over many schools.

The Co-op is not an educational institution, but a retailer that has no experience in running schools. It is also politically affiliated to the Labour Party, the very party carrying out this attack on the education of the working class. Creating a trust will only strengthen the hand of the ever-growing private sector in state education.

Staff, parents and pupils at Abbeydale must instead broaden their campaign of opposition by turning to workers and staff at other schools facing similar attacks. They must appeal to workers to mobilise against the school’s closure or privatisation as a matter of principle.

The Labour government’s socially divisive policies pit school against school and worker against worker. There are so-called failing schools because of deprivation and social inequality. The only immediate measure that can ameliorate the problem is a massive injection of funds into the education system. Increased educational funding would have to be accompanied by a raft of socially progressive policies to alleviate social inequality. This can only be conceived as part of political offensive to build a new independent party of the working class.



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