

Britain: Abbeydale Grange School's closure agreed by Sheffield Council

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The following article is being circulated as part of an ongoing campaign by the Socialist Equality Party to oppose the Abbeydale Grange School closure.

The Liberal Democrat-led Sheffield Council voted unanimously to close Abbeydale Grange School on December 9. The decision was met with anger and dismay by many staff, students and parents who have campaigned tirelessly to save the school since the proposal for closure was officially announced in July.

The school will close its doors to new pupils by September 2010. A skeleton staff will then remain to enable the Year 11 students to complete their studies by the end of the 2011 school year. At this time, the entire school will then shut. The proposed closure is a blow to all those directly concerned with the future of the school and who oppose the never ending assault on public education.

The Council decision was predictable. The three-month "consultation process" was only ever a means to let off steam. It provided a democratic veneer to cover the fact that there was no legal basis for the school's closure and that all basic protocols in deciding on school closures were being broken.

Contrary to the repeated claims that the decision was based on poor academic performance and a reluctance of parents in the catchment area to choose the school for their children, the closure has its roots in significant financial considerations and has been engineered over a number of years.

In June 2008, the school was one of 638 targeted under the government's National Challenge scheme, which put an ultimatum to schools where less than 30 percent of pupils achieve at least five GCSEs (General Certificate of Education) at grades A to C, including

Maths and English. They were told to improve their results by 2011 or face closure, merger or becoming Academies.

In the latest GCSE results, Abbeydale Grange was the eighth most improved school in Sheffield. A contentious OFSTED (Office for Standards in Education) inspection held in February 2009 failed the school and ordered it be placed in special measures. Although the school had a further year to improve its results, which it then did within months of the inspection, due process has been disregarded in announcing its closure.

The overwhelming majority of schools under the National Challenge that fail to meet the targets set have either become trust schools or Academies. The governing body of Abbeydale Grange proposed that the school become a trust, and was already in discussions with the Cooperative Trust about this possibility, but this established policy was repudiated by the Council in favour of closure.

Sheffield City Council has in fact cynically exploited the school in order to address its budget shortfalls. In July 2009, the council's audit committee revealed the council's debt was £1 billion. Chief Executive John Mothersole blamed this directly on "the carrying out of major projects such as Building Schools for the Future, (BSF) for which we have to borrow first and are then repaid by the government."

The £14 million BSF funding that has been withheld from Abbeydale Grange will now be absorbed into the budgets for other schools. Last month, Mothersole announced spending cuts of 10 percent over the next three years and the council cabinet are looking to find £18 million savings in order to preempt government cuts.

One area where large sums of money can be raised is

through the sale of council land. Abbeydale Grange School sits on 52 acres of prime building land situated in the lucrative South West of the city, where houses can fetch up to £1 million. Recently, planning permission was granted to build a residential complex for the elderly on the lower half of the school land. This follows a precedent set in the late 1990s, when two of Sheffield's leading special schools for children with behavioural difficulties—Folkwood and Broad Elms—were closed and their land redeveloped for private housing. There have been six applications for the deeds of Abbeydale Grange School since January 2008, including from a Merseyside property development company.

When the Labour government was elected in 1997, one of its election pledges was to end the sale of school playing fields. Instead, up to 2008, local authorities have sold off school land worth an estimated £236 million. The sites of 298 former schools have been sold off and another 188 earmarked for sale. In addition, 1,331 parcels of land smaller than 0.4 hectares have been sold off since 2001, without needing ministerial approval.

Abbeydale Grange became a Foundation School in 2007 and opted out of Local Authority control in an attempt at saving the school from closure. As a Foundation School, the governing body owns the deeds to the land, but if the council shuts, ownership of the school reverts to the council and it can be sold.

The contemptuous way in which the closure of Abbeydale Grange School is being organised must serve as a warning. A precedent is being set by which even the most basic and limited redress that exists for those wishing to challenge cuts and proposed school closures can be brushed aside. Schools in the southwest of Sheffield are already severely oversubscribed, with class sizes of well over 30 pupils. Places allocated for Abbeydale Grange pupils at other schools will end up in temporary classrooms for years to come.

The various teaching trade unions at Abbeydale Grange have done nothing to prevent the school closure and have allowed the proposed redundancies to proceed without protest. Staff have been left in a position where none of their jobs are guaranteed elsewhere. This is in line with the unions' consistent collaboration with the myriad measures imposed by the Labour government aimed at destroying what remains of the comprehensive

education system.

The Socialist Equality Party has intervened throughout the fight against closure to insist that only an independent political movement, guided by a socialist programme and mobilising all those involved in education, along with parents, pupils and other workers facing similar attacks, can defend the past gains of the working class.

Appeals to the various pro-business parties making up Sheffield City Council have proved to be a dead end. The school and its governing body have appealed to an independent adjudicator, but all the mechanisms for closure are in place. Parents have been given until the end of January to choose a new school for their children, and some have already left; Abbeydale Grange is no longer on the list for parents to register as a choice next year.

The most important appeal that can be made at this eleventh hour by staff, parents and students must be to the working class in Sheffield to defend public education in the city.

All social gains in Britain, including state education, were won only by and through struggle and in the teeth of entrenched opposition by the ruling elite. Today, amidst the greatest ever economic crisis of the capitalist system, the only way to defend past gains and win new ones is to turn towards socialism. This requires a mass mobilisation dedicated to breaking the grip of the financial aristocracy over society and its resources, placing them under the democratic control of working people. This demands above all a final organisational and political break with the Labour Party and its allies in the trade unions and the building of a new workers' party.

All those who want to discuss these issues further should attend the February 8 meeting organised by the Socialist Equality Party at Sharrow Vale Old School on the closure of Abbeydale Grange School and the policies needed to defend a decent education for all.



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