

# Librarians protest closures in Southampton, England

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Librarians in Southampton carried out a two-day strike, August 13 and 16, to oppose plans by the Conservative-led City Council to close Millbrook and Thornhill libraries and replace at least seven paid workers with volunteers this year. City councillors have also announced a reduction of £140,000 in the library budget over the next two years.

The strike follows a previous one held in June. Another was originally planned for July but was delayed after the public services union Unison took part in further negotiations. However, an overwhelming majority of the 82 Unison members voted in opposition to the new proposals and in favour of strike action. In addition, they are also refusing to train incoming voluntary staff or participate in other changes.

The cuts in Southampton are part of wider reductions in library services across Hampshire announced by the county council at the end of July that will result in the loss of 58 jobs to “save” £1.5 million. They will result in a drastically reduced quality of service, and worse, no service at all for local communities.

Opponents to the cuts have explained that the service is already chronically deprived, with one Hampshire-based author, John Pilkington, describing libraries as already “pared to the bone”.

The council claims the measures are necessary because of a £1.3 million deficit due to “financial pressures”, including rising bills, “uncertainty in public sector funding” and central government pressure to make annual “efficiency savings”. One councillor complained that councils had no choice but to impose cuts and added that the “government had to face facts and provide adequate funding”.

After years of underfunding by the Labour government, the council says the service is “unsustainable” with the current £18 million budget

and requires further cuts. Various initiatives to cut staff costs employed over the years—“flexible” working hours, new technology, non-replacement of staff, and “partnerships” with private businesses—have proved insufficient.

Although the closure of Millbrook library was announced in October 2009, the workers still remain uninformed regarding the plans. The area surrounding the library has been handed over to private developers and contractors as part of the “Millbrook Regeneration” scheme, which the city council used to justify the closure of the library, one of the few remaining public services in the area.

City councillors have said that unless the private sector steps in to save the library, it will close this October. Even if it remains open, it will be a much reduced service run entirely by voluntary staff.

What is happening in Southampton is a testing ground for Prime Minister David Cameron’s “Big Society” philosophy. The shift from paid labour to volunteerism and takeover of services by the private sector is a prelude to the destruction of public services across the country. It is an example of the government’s intent to destroy essential public provision in the interests of an already bloated financial elite.

The impetus for this agenda is the unsustainable theft of social wealth in the form of the bank bailouts, which the working population is now being forced to pay for through decades of austerity measures.

It is evident that there exists mass opposition to these cuts. Staff on the picket line reported major support from the public, many of whom have offered to directly participate in the campaign.

The main obstacle confronting the working class is the role of the trade unions. While making various

noises over the bank bailouts, Unison has sought to contain, divert and dissipate opposition to the cuts.

Unison is restricting the campaign to a petition drive, claiming that public pressure will force the council to reverse the closures. However, as past petitions prove—a similar one to oppose cuts to libraries in 2007 attracted 12,000 signatures—this will do nothing to reverse cuts from central government, and will do even less to defend librarians' jobs.

More fundamentally, instead of uniting all sections of workers against a generalized assault on jobs, wages and living standards, such campaigns divide resistance along local and sectional lines.

This is not unique to Southampton. Despite these cuts being nationwide and across all departments, Unison has confined opposition to local and isolated campaigns. In this case it has been explicitly limited to libraries in Southampton, with all anger directed against the city council. Indeed Unison has made an issue of the cuts being disproportionately imposed on the library service. The logic of this argument is to pit workers employed in different sectors against each other. Unison has even promoted the idea that voluntary staff should play a role alongside paid librarians.

Unison is determined to keep control of the situation in Southampton and prevent any independent action that could be a catalyst for broader opposition developing to the Tory-Lib Dem government.

One union official approached by the *World Socialist Web Site* insisted that the campaign had to remain local and based around the defence of the libraries and not become the focus of a united struggle against the cuts. The official complained bitterly against proposed tax rebates for pensioners, saying the money should be used for libraries instead.

A Unison shop steward outside Bitterne library in East Southampton said she had been told by Unison officials not to discuss with the WSWs. But one worker on the picket line made clear his concerns.

A librarian for many years, he detailed how the service had been subject to regular cutbacks. He said the Conservative council is now “looking to replace paid council staff, specifically on this occasion, those in libraries. Volunteers are going to replace librarians. They are also looking to close down one of the district branches. These all kicked off as a part of Cameron’s

‘Big Society’ idea.

“They spent money to bail out the banking system. It is affecting the poorest sections in society. We are being targeted for it. We should not have to pay for the bankers’ mistakes.

“The government is targeting the services the working class depends on,” he added. “The middle class and above have the money to buy their own services. The NHS is being privatised, and it is the same way that the council services are being privatised.

“The pay freeze for the public sector workers is ridiculous. We don’t see any of the big companies or the banks taking any of the pain of the cuts. It is very, very unjust”.



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