

Rawmarsh school teachers strike against job cuts in Rotherham, UK

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17 January 2011

Teachers at Rawmarsh Community School (RCS) in Rotherham, South Yorkshire, started a three-day strike January 12, in protest over proposed job cuts. A one day stoppage took place the previous week, shutting the school.

The school governors and headmaster announced the loss of 34 staff, including up to 20 teachers in order to reduce a £1.3 million deficit. There are currently 80 class teachers at the school.

Headmaster Stuart Wilson, who joined the school four months ago, claimed fewer teachers were needed as pupil numbers had fallen sharply since 2008. He acknowledged that class sizes would increase as a result of the cuts.

RCS is a mixed 11-16 year-olds Comprehensive school, with over 1,100 students. The vast majority of families in the local area send their children to the school and it is also attended by some pupils outside the Rawmarsh area.

The school is a member of the Government's Specialist Schools Programme, conferring special status in a designated aptitude and relying on a large amount of commitment and dedicated work from staff. RCS's specialist area is sport and other extra-curricular activities and it is designated as a Sports College.

Two groups of school staff on the picket line spoke to reporters with the *World Socialist Web Site* on the first day of their strike action. All wished to remain anonymous, fearing repercussions from speaking out.

One teacher explained, "It's a vulnerable time. We have been told not to speak to anyone."

She thought that the current reduction in pupil numbers was being used to cut jobs. But at least two year groups presently had class sizes of up to 28 children. And this is the situation before the latest proposed job losses.

While facing indifference to their fate from the authorities, the school's staff received warm support from the local community of parents and residents.

A teacher explained, "Last week, we went to the Retail World, Parkgate [a local shopping centre] with some leaflets, explaining our cause, and the public was very supportive."

Another added, "The situation at this school affects the whole community. Some of the students work at Parkgate, or may go on to do so."

A third teacher said that some teaching staff at the school had changed unions from the National Association of Schoolmasters/ Union of Women Teachers to the National Union of Teachers, which has called the strike.

Her colleague added, "We are keeping our fingers crossed—to prolong the process—and hope we lose as few staff as possible. We understand that the school has to save money, but it has to be more reasonable.

"I think the reason why this dispute has had so much support and been so high profile is because we are the first school where this has happened. We have had support from Barnsley, Sheffield, Aston, and even messages of support from London. Hopefully this will set a precedent."

The teachers had held a public meeting the previous day to highlight the dispute at the school. The meeting and the leafleting had been planned when the teachers were told that they were not allowed to discuss the issues of the dispute with students, or seek to contact parents through them.

One teacher pointed out that a nearby school in Swinton actually had a deficit twice as high as Rawmarsh, but was not considering cuts as severe.

Another group of teachers on the same picket line also requested anonymity, with one saying,

“Everything has to be off the record, otherwise we will face disciplinary procedures. I’ve been here for many years and it has been an excellent school to work at. The job cuts came as a bit of a shock. We haven’t been given an official budget breakdown. Class sizes will get bigger ... but by how much, I don’t know.”

In addition to falling pupil numbers, RCS has an inherited deficit and recently suffered the loss of a number of grants. The school management and local authority are engaged in the well-worn sleight of hand by claiming that the loss of teaching staff at a school can be realised with no detrimental effect on the education of its pupils.

Dorothy Smith, Rotherham Council’s senior director of schools, said, “We have been working closely with the school to try and resolve the issues the school faces in relation to its budget position, caused by the reduction in pupil numbers and national funding changes. It would appear that despite everyone’s best efforts, redundancies will be necessary. We are fully committed to support the school to ensure that students’ education is not disrupted.”

Having called the strike, the NUT has indicated that job losses are acceptable, with the local secretary John Dalton urging, “Whilst it is important to tackle the deficit, it should be done in a more measured and balanced way, to reduce the impact on attainment.”

In the days following the initial two days of industrial action at the school, management announced that 17 jobs would be cut instead of the original 34 and deferred some of the redundancies until the end of the year, but made it clear they were still committed to these job losses. The last strike date of the current action is January 19.



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