

UK library cuts proceeding apace

Trevor Johnson
1 November 2011

In spite of protests all over the country, library closures and cutbacks are proceeding as planned.

At least 20 libraries have already been closed, and around 600 are under threat. Around 100 libraries have been temporarily reprieved, but many of these will face further attempts to close them next year, and many are subject to cuts in staff, opening hours and resources.

In October, the High Court rejected attempts by campaigners to prevent Brent Local Authority in London from closing 6 of its 12 libraries.

Brent SOS Libraries had sought a judicial review of the decision, arguing that the cuts meant the authority was failing to comply with its statutory duties. Mr. Justice Ouseley in London's High Court ruled there was no evidence to support the campaigners' allegations.

Almost as soon as the decision was announced, the authority confirmed the libraries were being "made secure". It expects to save £1 million by means of the closures. Brent Council leader Ann John hailed the High Court decision. "The judge, having carefully considered all the complaints, has found in our favour on each and every point. It means that we can now push ahead with our exciting plans...."

Within hours of the ruling, the council had boarded up Preston Road and Cricklewood libraries. Kensal Rise was padlocked, but could not be boarded up because of campaigners who are camping outside the branch. Kensal Rise Library was opened by author Mark Twain in 1900.

Bolton Council is closing five libraries, disregarding a 15,000-strong petition handed in to Town Hall chiefs in May. The council's executive chose to finalise the plan at its meeting this month. The campaigners have been raising funds to follow the Brent campaign into the courts, but this may not now happen.

In Oxfordshire, 16 of the 43 libraries are losing two thirds of their staff funding under cuts proposed by the

county council. The council has attempted to split opposition to the cuts by claiming that those opposing library cutbacks were increasing cuts on the disabled and the elderly. Vicky Jordan of the campaign group "Our Woodcote Library" called such comments "inaccurate and offensive."

Authors Philip Pullman and Julia Donaldson attended a conference in London to oppose library closures on October 22. Pullman said before the event, "One of the things which bothers me most of all is the effect on children if libraries are closed. There was a study recently, which I will quote in my speech, showing British children read for enjoyment far less than children in Kazakhstan or Albania. Another study, quite different and separate, demonstrated that children in the UK were far less happy than any other country. I think these two are probably connected.

"We must be careful what we do to our children. We must look after them better than we are doing, and that includes preserving libraries."

In Leeds, 20 smaller libraries are set to close, with the council expecting to save £700,000. Members of staff are also having their salaries reduced by thousands of pounds per year, and being told they will lose their jobs if they fail to sign new contracts. Cow Close, Rawdon, Shadwell and Drighlington will stay open until March 2012, but will then close unless money is raised by the public to fund a transfer of ownership. Scholes, Whinmoor and Methley will remain open for only 15 hours a week.

The 53 libraries in Leeds receive 4 million visits per year. A report by the council, however, said that libraries would become "irrelevant" if they were not given "A Fresh Direction" by making drastic cuts.

While libraries in Hackney have not been closed as originally planned, savings have been made by closing reference sections, concentrating resources at three of the bigger libraries and cutting wages. Full-time

members of staff are being demoted by one or two grades, resulting in a drop in their annual salaries of between £2,000 and £5,000. Part-time staff will see a reduction in normal hours and increased working hours on Sunday.

In Manchester, all 26 libraries will close on Fridays and Sundays, and 5 will be closed down altogether.

In all the areas of the UK affected by closures, there are local campaigns to oppose them: “Brent Save Our Six (SOS)”, “Save Bolton Libraries”, “Upper Norwood Library Campaign” and many others. Up until now, no national campaign is uniting these actions.

The role of the unions has been to issue token statements of support for those opposing library closures while ensuring that no effective action is taken.

The Unison web site lists numerous local campaigns without saying anything about its own responsibility for allowing councils to go ahead with their plans. After stating that they “are the biggest union in the UK for the library and culture service, representing the majority of the 27,000 of library staff employed as librarians, library assistants and managers in all library authorities,” Unison advises not to “wait until it’s too late.”

Unison and the other unions waited for a year after the coalition government came to power without so much as calling a demonstration against it.

The Unison “Campaign pack for branches” notes that “there is a growing trend for authorities to try and reduce staffing levels and avoid employing people (and paying them) by relying on the use of volunteers,” but then accepts the use of volunteers as a good thing so long as they are not used to “replace paid staff”. When jobs and salaries have been cut, the response of the unions has been a deafening silence, with no strikes called to defend jobs and services.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact