

West Yorkshire, UK parents and teachers march against school privatisation

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More than 200 parents, teachers and members of the local community in Otley, West Yorkshire, marched through the town on Saturday, November 26, to oppose the decision to transform their local senior school into a privately run academy.

Prince Henry's Grammar School, with 1,400 pupils, founded in 1607 by royal charter, is the oldest school in the region. It is a comprehensive school, which serves the whole community in this small town in the heart of the Yorkshire Dales.

At present, it is part of the educational provision of Leeds City Council, but as an academy it would be run as a publicly funded school with independent control over its finance, curriculum, terms and conditions of staff, recruitment, redundancy, the length of the school day and so on. In effect, it would be privatised.

Under government legislation, rushed through by the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition almost as soon as it came into office in May 2010, the decision about transfer to academy status could only be made by the board of governors. At Prince Henry's, the governors were split down the middle, with 10 in favour and 10 against.

Those in favour refused to accept defeat and kept reintroducing the proposal. On October 11, they used the opportunity presented by the unavoidable absence of one of the opposing governors to force the vote through. The absent governor tried to vote by proxy, but this was denied. Widespread calls for a ballot vote of the parents and/or of the community were also denied. The change is due to be implemented on December 1.

Three very well-attended public meetings have expressed almost unanimous opposition. One meeting

of more than 150 people demanded that parents be balloted. At the next governors' meeting, the chairman of governors, himself a parent, used his casting vote to defeat the proposal.

At a public meeting held on November 22, the whole audience of 270 parents, teachers and members of the community supported a vote of no confidence in the chairman of the governing body. A similar vote against the head teacher was passed with no one against and 21 abstentions. Other proposals for further action, including keeping children away from school if the change is implemented on December 1, were put forward from the meeting, but the platform, which was made up of union and town council bureaucrats, refused to put them to the vote.

At the end of the meeting, there was an overwhelming vote in favour of holding a march and rally opposing the proposed academy. The November 26 demonstration began at the school gates and went through the town to a rally at a local playing field.

Susan Steer, a parent with two children at Prince Henry's, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "I am disgusted that they denied our demand for a democratic vote on such an important issue. Also, it's horrendous that so much power be granted to one woman [head teacher, Janet Sheriff]. She has become a despot.

"There should be time to re-consider for the parents to be consulted, as is our right. An ideal situation would be for her [Sheriff] and the chair of governors, Paul Tranter, to resign and be gone.

"It stinks when Sheriff says that the issue is too complicated to be put to the parents."

A young mother explained, "We don't feel we understand enough about academy status. We don't feel that we have been informed as we should have been.... We are asking for more time, and the parents

and staff should have a vote. It shouldn't be a decision made by 10 people for the whole community. It seems they are manipulating things to push it through in a rush to get this extra money, but they haven't shown how this money will be spent."

Leila Smith had previously worked as a teacher at Prince Henry's. She said, "I am really impressed at the turnout for the march. It's significant that the press did not show up here.

"I think Janet Sheriff will go ahead, but I hope the students will put up some opposition. The choice should lie with them and their parents.

"I enjoyed working at Prince Henry's. The staff are a wonderful, hard-working bunch of people. It is a real shame that this has been foisted upon them with no consultation. Some members of staff have been there for 40 years. Their views should be counted, as opposed to someone who has been there for two years and obviously has her own agenda."

Sixty-four teachers out of a total staff of 84 staff have taken six days of strike action against the decision. A teacher from the school on picket duty explained, "The head has given assurances that pay and conditions will be protected, but we don't believe it. Despite all the promises, she doesn't have to adhere to nationally agreed levels.

"We know that our workload will increase. Even now, most of us effectively work a ten-hour day and about four hours at weekends, and it will get worse. We expect we will have to cover for absent staff and carry out break and lunchtime duties as well as invigilate exams and all sorts of other administrative tasks."

The two largest teachers' unions, the National Union of Teachers and the National Association of Schoolmasters/Union of Women Teachers, claim to oppose academies, but they have allowed school after school to be picked off all over the country. They insist that national action is impossible because it is "illegal" to take industrial action on anything other than terms and conditions.

Having told the parents that the only hope of reprieve is a change of heart by Education Minister Michael Gove or the local chair of governors, they encouraged the parents to send a deputation to London as a "last-minute appeal" to Gove.

Government policy is to transform all existing schools into academies. Already, Lincolnshire Council

has recommended that all primary and secondary schools should become academies, despite vehement local opposition. This policy, plus the millions being spent on the creation of so-called "Free Schools", is directed to the complete destruction of public education.

As in every other sector, the groundwork for the government's policy was carried forward by the previous Labour government. When Sir George Young, leader of the House of Commons, was recently questioned on the rules by which locally maintained schools switched to academy status, he confirmed that the government was "following the same rules as the previous administration when it came to academies".

The government is planning cuts in education spending of 14.4 percent over the next four years, the largest cut for a similar period since the 1950s. Along with the attacks on health care and all other forms of social provision, their aim is to destroy all the social gains made by the working class since the Second World War.

Decent education and health care are basic human rights, which governments of all stripes claim are no longer affordable. The defence and expansion of these services are incompatible with a society whose fundamental principle is inequality—a society in which trillions are handed out to the banks while the entire political and media establishment claims that there is "no money" for decent education and health care.

The only way that public education can be defended and extended is through an independent movement of the working class, which breaks free from the treacherous grip of the trade unions and the Labour Party and fights on a socialist perspective.



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