High Court ruling paves way for closure of 600 UK libraries

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Local councils up and down the country have been given a green light to close down libraries following a decision to throw out an appeal to the High Court by Brent SOS Libraries. The campaigners had sought to reverse the decision to close six libraries in the north London borough. At least 600 out of an estimated 4,612 libraries are now under threat.

Brent council announced last April its intention to close 50 percent of the borough's libraries, which were then duly boarded and locked up before campaigners could even launch an appeal. A spokeswoman said, "All the six libraries which the executive decided to close in April are now closed, and are being made secure."

The decision by the three judges, Lord Justice Pill, Lord Justice Richards and Lord Justice Davis, upheld an earlier High Court ruling against Brent SOS Libraries' challenge that the closures in Barham Park, Kensal Rise, Preston Road, Neasden, Cricklewood and Tokyngton were "fundamentally flawed and unlawful".

Lord Justice Pill said, "Given the scale of the spending reductions the council was required to make and the information available following earlier studies, a decision that the library service should bear a share of the reduction was not, in my judgment, unlawful."

Brent Council is dominated by the Labour Party, which has 40 councillors, while the Liberal Democrats have 17 and the Conservatives 6 seats. Led by Labour's Ann John, the council is now pushing through £104 million in cuts to vital local services to meet the budget requirements of the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition.

The decision shows how Labour councils nationally are operating as de facto coalition partners with the government in enforcing austerity measures to meet the interests of the banks and super-rich. The role of the local government trade unions is to dissipate opposition and prevent a united offensive by council employees and working people against the cuts.

Brent SOS Libraries has wide support from local families, teachers, council workers and high-profile campaigners, including playwright Alan Bennett, authors Zadie Smith and Philip Pullman, musicians Nick Cave, Depeche Mode and the Pet Shop Boys.

Alan Bennett told a campaign meeting, "Libraries have to be local. They have to be handy. They shouldn't need an expedition … But that early period in a child's reading life is vital. Interfere with that, hinder a child's access to books in whatever form and you damage that child, probably for life … Not every family has a computer. Many of them are quite poor. The only way they can keep up with their classmates and have access to a computer and books as well is at the library."

Campaigners have pointed out that the cost of the Brent Library closure programme of £150,000 and another £258,000 for staff redundancy payments would have paid for many libraries to remain open. They are considering taking the case to the Supreme Court. This will require considerable finances.

In a dangerous retreat, the campaign group has now sent a business plan to Brent Council for the community to run the library at no cost to the council. But placing the burden of the cost of running services onto an impoverished population cannot be the basis on which the public library system—much less any other social provision in Britain—can be defended.

Politically, it replicates the "Big Society" propaganda of the coalition government, which aims to replace state-run universal social provision—the result of militant class battles by generations of workers—with so-called

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charitable institutions. In reality, this is just a mechanism by which social services are hived out to private business, or destroyed as a right.

This has already created a situation where, despite the widespread desire to unite the opposition to library closures, campaign groups are instead putting forward competing financial packages in a virtual “beauty contest”. The majority of the campaigns to defend local libraries have channelled the genuine anger of working class communities into spurious self-help campaigns, determined by the parameters laid down by the government’s austerity measures. Three libraries in the London borough of Lewisham are now run solely by volunteers, while highly skilled staff has been sacked.

The fundamental right to education, libraries, health care and other necessities is anathema to a government of the rich and for the rich. An example of the cultural vandalism now under way is the closure of Kensal Rise library in London, which was opened by the great American writer Mark Twain in 1900.

Twain said at its opening, “I formally declare this reading-room open, and I think that the legislature should not compel a community to provide itself with intelligent food, but give it the privilege of providing it if the community so desires.” Kensal Green has one of the highest child illiteracy rates in London.

To fully fund the existing library system in the UK amounts to less than one tenth of one percent of GDP. An economic and political order that is systematically destroying the ability of large sections of the population to access the riches of human culture cannot be reformed, but must be replaced.

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