

Privatisation agenda behind government threats against UK teachers

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Education Secretary Michael Gove has demanded head teachers take “robust” measures against staff involved in industrial action against the attack on their pay and conditions, by docking their pay.

The threat is a signal of the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition intent to roll out the conditions that exist in academies to all public schools, in preparation for the complete handing over of education to the private sector.

Introduced by the Blair Labour government in 2000, academy schools are free from control of Local Education Authorities, funded directly by central government and not bound by national teaching pay and work agreements. With more than half of all pupils in England now taught in academy schools, or those with similar status, the government intends to convert an additional 600 schools into academies by the end of next year.

Writing in September, Simon Rogers in the *Guardian* described it as a “revolution...in England’s schools”, reporting that 2,309 academies were now open—10 times the number when the coalition took office in 2010. They employ 120,000 teachers—“one-quarter of all front-line staff”—and educate 1.7 million pupils.

In some areas, “academies are now the main type of school”, he reported, with Kent having the greatest number—157 opened or planned.

A separate analysis of the annual reports of five major chains of academy schools in 2011 by the *Guardian* showed that senior staff were on six-figure salaries, in some instances of £240,000 or more, under the headline, “Charities running academies using taxpayers’ cash to reward senior staff with huge salary hikes.”

One of these was the Harris Federation, sponsored by Lord Harris of Peckham, the multimillionaire chief

executive of the Carpetright chain and a major donor to the Conservative Party.

While nominally a charity, the government gave academies “exempt charity” status in 2011 so that they no longer have to publish their accounts with the Charity Commission. The year earlier, the Harris Federation reported a turnover of £130 million in 2010. This can be expected to have increased significantly as the federation now runs 19 academies—14 secondary schools and 5 primary schools—accounting for 16,000 pupils in the London area.

Early last year, when teachers, governors and parents at the former Downhills Primary in north London opposed government moves to force it to become an academy, Gove sacked the governors and made the Harris Federation its preferred sponsor. The pretext was a damning report by the Ofsted that had led to the school being placed in special measures in February.

A action by the Save Downhills campaign accused Gove of “riding roughshod” over their wishes and had sought a judicial review of the education secretary’s decision. But in August, this was rejected by the High Court, which defended Gove’s action, ruling that in light of the school’s “egregious” performance, the education secretary had made a rational decision.

Downhills was reopened as Harris Primary Academy in September.

Gove also backed moves by Harris to take over Kelsey Park school in Bromley, despite staff and local authority opposition. It is now the Harris Academy Beckenham.

The largest academy sponsor is the Academies Enterprise Trust (AET). On December 5, it boasted that it had taken over responsibility for six primary schools and one secondary school as of December 1, “following the approval of the Department for

Education (DfE).”

The schools in Burton-on-Trent, Loughborough, Bristol, Leeds, Birmingham and Barnsley mean AET now runs 60 schools in England: 30 primary, 23 secondary, 6 special educational needs and a studio school, as well as co-sponsoring three Mayoral Academies with the Greater London Authority.

Synabor PLC, an education recruitment company that provides staff and cover supervisors (a new designation created by the government’s “Remodelling of the School Workforce” agenda) to schools and colleges, services AET. David Triggs, CEO at AET, is a director at Synabor. Its website boasts that it hosts free seminars “on the process and benefits of academy conversion and the opportunity to discuss conversion with other like-minded education leaders” with Triggs as guest speaker.

Another academy sponsor is the Elliot Foundation. It runs five schools in the West Midlands area, with another two affiliated. In May of this year, the National Association of Head Teachers announced it was supporting the Elliot Foundation and that its director of policy, Kathryn James, had accepted a place on its board. It works with a range of partners, including Virtuoso IT, which supplies its schools’ software, and the consultancy firm Prospects, which sells school improvement packages.

Prospects boasts that it “delivers the largest Ofsted [Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills, created in 2006 as the body overseeing schools inspections] early years inspection service contract in the country, covering the North of England and the Midlands.”

Billed as a leading education, employment and training company, it is also responsible for the government’s “welfare to work” programme in the south west and London.

This means that the partner of one academy sponsor is involved in official schools inspections, the results of which are the trigger for government intervention to force them into academy status.

To complete the picture, the current head of Ofsted, Sir Michael Wilshaw, was the former head of Mossbourne Academy. In September, he demanded schools should be more selective in awarding teachers a pay rise and that schools should be marked accordingly.

Wilshaw took over in 2011 from Christine Gilbert,

who resigned the position amid unconfirmed reports that she had been interviewed for the post of chief executive of the United Learning Trust (ULT), which runs 21 academies. The *Guardian* reported at the time that shortly after Gilbert’s announcement, “the then chair of Ofsted, Zenna Atkins, announced that she was resigning to lead Gems, a private school provider which also has an interest in running academies and free schools.”



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