

UK: Sheffield's 82-year-old Central Library under threat due to cuts

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Sheffield Central Library is under threat from the decision by the city's Labour-run authority to enter an agreement with a private developer, which is considering the option of turning it into a five-star hotel.

The art deco, grade-II listed building—which houses the Graves Art Gallery—was first opened to the public in 1934 and has provided access to art and literature free of charge for generations ever since. It also contains a children's library in the basement and a theatre to its rear.

The council has reduced spending on services by £300 million since 2011 as the central government grant has been cut by 50 percent. It is set to cut a further £51 million over the next year. This has led to a situation in which nothing is considered off limits. The Central Library, which was built and opened during the Great Depression, is now deemed unaffordable. A repair and upgrade bill of £30 million has been routinely cited as a justification for the new plans by the council.

Jack Scott, Labour councillor and cabinet member for community services and libraries, stated to the *Guardian* newspaper: “As eye-watering cuts to local government, especially local government in the north, have hit home... we're in a position where we need to consider a range of options.”

The Labour authority stated that it was first approached in October about the hotel plan by Chinese company, Sichuan Guodong Construction Group. It is now the subject of a 12-month feasibility study in which the company will consider the hotel option. It sits in a prime location on Tudor Square, a popular location for sports and entertainment events that is home to the Crucible and Lyceum theatres.

As far as the Labour authority is concerned, the decision over the future of such a valued public asset rests with a private company and its commercial calculations and not the public it is meant to serve.

After the plans first became known, a petition to defend

the library gathered over 10,000 signatures. Three public meetings have been held with the council and its representatives, which were attended by hundreds of people. The overwhelming position has been one of opposition to the proposal.

At the meetings, Councillor Scott stated there was no alternative other than cutting other services such as care for the elderly. In response to a contribution from Rebecca Gransbury, who started the petition, he reiterated that the council was not prepared to make any commitment over levels of funding to library services. He cynically told the audience that if they knew of any philanthropists who would step forward to save the library they should let him know.

The defence of the Central Library against this act of cultural vandalism requires a perspective that challenges the economic and social interests that stand behind the actions of the Labour council.

This is not a local question. Across the country library services, along with other local amenities, public spaces and critical social services have been laid waste after successive rounds of cuts.

In April, the *World Socialist Web Site* reported on figures, obtained from a BBC Freedom of Information request, which revealed that 343 libraries had been forced to close since 2010, and 8,000 library jobs had been axed. It showed that libraries in Labour-controlled authorities, including Sheffield and London, had been hit hardest.

The closure of libraries and axing of library staff has been accompanied by other measures such as shorter hours, reduced book funds and use of volunteer staff. These have served to nullify the 1964 Public Libraries and Museums Act, which places on the government and local authorities a responsibility to provide access to library services.

Sheffield Council had supposedly committed itself to the Central Library and 11 other “hubs” after it threatened

the closure of 15 libraries—more than half the city’s 28—in order to implement £1.6 million of cuts to the library budget. This threat was only withdrawn in 2014 following an agreement that the targeted libraries would be taken over by volunteer groups with reduced council funding. In the case of Walkley library—the only Carnegie library in the city, which was opened in 1904—this included selling it to True North Brew Company to build a bar/café on the premises with the volunteer group running the library from a reduced space.

This record demonstrates that the Labour authority has repudiated the defence of one of the few remaining free services available to the public. What is being taken away will never be restored. Hence, the well-founded scepticism in council’s assurances that it will use proceeds from the business rates on a five-star hotel to fund a new purpose built library “elsewhere” in the city centre.

This forms part of a cynical and divisive approach by the council to dissipate opposition. Another aspect of this is to separate the fate of Graves Gallery from that of the library itself. The business plan of the council involves keeping the art gallery on site and open to “the public” in the event of the library being transformed into a five-star hotel. For good measure, it has stated that it will be moved from the third to the ground floor for accessibility purposes. However, this would no longer be a public space but housed in a venue, which is by definition exclusive and reserved for a wealthy clientele with the increased likelihood that it will become, as one person put it, “subsidised lobby fodder.”

Sheffield council insists that nothing is finalised, and the plans are based on a lease not a sale of Central Library. However, in imposing central government austerity cuts, Labour councils such as Sheffield are facilitating a major redistribution of wealth to the financial elite—which now involves the plundering of public assets. Due to the subservience of councils, the Tory government is on course to phase out the system of central government grants entirely by 2020.

Nationwide, Labour councils are involved in a fire sale of public assets. The *Observer* provided a list of Labour councils that are pressing ahead with the sale of grade II listed buildings. This included Ealing and Hornsey councils—which are selling their town halls to private developers to make into boutique hotels—and Liverpool council, which is hiving off its Municipal Buildings to prospective buyers for retail, leisure and residential development. This is far from a complete list. In a separate article, the newspaper reported that more than

half of councils had turned over green spaces to private companies and sold listed buildings and libraries.

Any resource that can be turned into a source of profit is being handed over to the private sector, while services are rationed, outsourced and made conditional upon the ability to attract inward investment in competition with other cities or regions of the country.

Sheffield Council signed an investment deal with Sichuan Guodong Construction Group in July this year, in a deal reputed to be worth £220 million over the next three years and £1 billion over the next 60 years. This is the largest of its kind for any UK city outside of London. At the time, the individual projects were not specified, but subsequently it has proposed a £30 million private residential development near West Bar, and an educational partnership between Sheffield and Chengdu.

The issue is not the national identity of the company involved but the privatisation of community resources and the destruction of local services in which Labour authorities act in a de facto alliance with the Tory government in reducing the working class to penury.

The action of Sheffield council demonstrates that Labour remains a party of big business despite now being led by its nominally “left” leader Jeremy Corbyn. Indeed, just months after his initial September 2015 election, Corbyn and his closest political ally, Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell, sent a letter to all Labour councils demanding they abide by the law and impose austerity cuts demanded by the Conservative government.

The fight for access to culture and learning must be advanced as part of a broader struggle against social inequality and the capitalist profit system.



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