

Anti-academy schools protests in UK curtailed by trade unions

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17 April 2018

In the 16 years since the school academy programme was introduced by the 1997 Labour government, there has been a substantial increase in the number of schools converting to the business-sponsored model of education.

Academies are state-funded but privately run. According to government statistics released in February, there are currently 7,060 academy schools in England with 1,184 waiting to become academies. Within these, 64.7 percent of secondary schools (11-16 years) have converted, while only 26.8 percent of primaries (4-11) are in academy status.

There has been much debate about the detrimental impact that becoming an academy has on the standard of education, with the costs of converting vastly outweighing any benefits. Over the past decade, many campaigns have been held to stop the drive to academisation, which amount to the wholesale privatisation and marketisation of education. These have been largely led by teachers and parents, who feel that the future of their children's education will be damaged.

In other schools that have already been taken over by Multi-Academy Trusts [MATs], there is a complete disregard for teachers' conditions.

At St. Helens Primary Academy in Barnsley, staff took strike action against the academy management. A campaign launched by parents circulated a petition declaring no confidence in the school's executive head teacher and demanded the removal of Academies Enterprise Trust (AET), which is the largest MAT in the country. Many are demanding the school should return to local authority control.

In this case, National Education Union [NEU] workers were balloted and there was a "100 percent vote for strikes on a 91 percent turnout." This is down to the conditions that have seen a revolving door of staff affecting the running of the school. This is a familiar picture. MATs take over the running of schools, and

ultimately this leads to an exodus of staff due to the practices of each MAT provider. Staff are forced to stand in line behind the new school leaders or are pressured to leave the school, as the academy chain puts its own stamp on the school.

Parent groups have supported the teachers with their own campaigns. Leonie Gleadhall, who was the chair of the school governors until AET sacked her last July, set up the #StHelensWarriors group with public meetings and protests held against the MAT. A first strike was held on March 21, with the school completely shut down. Another strike, for two days, took place April 10/11.

Also striking for two days on February 27 were staff at The Village School in Brent, west London. A strike was held on March 26 at Acton High School in west London in opposition to plans to turn the school into an academy. It is understood that the school will become part of ARK Schools, a multi-academy trust that runs 34 schools in London, Birmingham, Hastings and Portsmouth.

In Brent, London, a campaign took place against Grove Park and Woodfield School becoming part of an MAT, with protests outside the meeting that decided the final decision. Protesting with placards were members of the NEU, which is made up of the National Union of Teachers (NUT) and the Association of Lecturers and Teachers.

Present at the protest was the joint general secretary of the NEU, Kevin Courtney. Earlier action by teachers and parents had been praised by local Labour councillor Jumbo Chan, who also weighed into the debate by stating his views against the change.

Despite the rhetoric from the unions and some Labourites, the consultation process ended predictably in defeat. Consultation periods, where staff and parents are asked for their opinions on academisation, are foregone conclusions. Decisions are already made between the department of education, the council and the MAT

providers.

It is the conditions that schools face in terms of their stretched budgets that dictate the move towards academy conversion, not the welfare of staff or pupils. Schools now publicly state that becoming an academy is a way to accommodate the pressure of reduced budgets.

A statement on the Brent consultation read: “The current context for special schools includes increasing budget pressures—as income is static or falling per pupil while costs increase—and challenges in recruitment and retention of staff.” It added, “The schools are exploring whether forming a multi-academy trust would help address these challenges.”

Staff at Friesland School, in Sandiacre in Derbyshire, took strike action over five days in February to protest becoming an academy. A revealing letter from the school to parents supporting the academisation noted the role of the unions in facilitating the process nationally: “The Governing Body believes this strike action to be both unwarranted and excessive. As we have said many times, schools across the country have been academising on a monthly basis for many years and strike action is rare.”

Due to the refusal of the unions to wage a joint offensive of educators, the Friesland School letter was able to state, “There are now significantly more secondary academies than Local Authority Maintained schools both nationally and in Derbyshire.”

Any strikes called by the teaching unions, as a way of maintaining control over the anger of staff at the consequences of becoming academies, are being confined to a few single schools.

NEU members at three schools in east London’s Newham borough—Avenue Primary School, Cumberland and Keir Hardie—held a series of strikes in February and March against plans to turn the schools into academies. They fear that this will undermine the pay, conditions and job security of all the school’s staff. The strikes were well supported by parents.

In their attempts to turn schools into academies, governing boards are seeking to ride roughshod over basic democratic norms. Parents at Avenue school took legal action to oppose the lack of a serious consultation involved in the proposed transfer of the school into an academy. Last month, a judge at the Royal Courts of Justice heard the judicial review and granted parents permission to proceed towards the next stage of their case. A conversion date to become an academy had been scheduled for April 1, but the decision means that is now on hold.

The role of the NEU, the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers [NASUWT], and the Education Institute of Scotland in opposing any national struggle to defend their members’ livelihoods is demonstrated by their response to the votes by delegates at their annual conferences for strike action. In response, all that the NEU is proposing is a joint committee of the union to meet in May to consider the ballot for strike action called by delegates in its NUT section. The NEU is only committed to holding an indicative ballot of members this summer. The NASUWT has not called a national strike since 2013, instead authorising only actions short of strikes.

The unions are being assisted in their isolation of the strikes against academisation of schools by various pseudo-left outfits.

The Socialist Workers Party (SWP) is campaigning for the replacement of right-wing Labour councillors with supporters of the Momentum group, who back Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, claiming this will halt the academy programme. In Newham, the long-standing Labour mayor, Sir Robin Wales, has been deselected and the Momentum-backed Rokhsana Fiaz has replaced him as Labour’s candidate for the upcoming local elections. Fiaz has made hollow promises to oppose the academisation of schools. This is despite the fact that Labour’s policy on the matter is that a Labour government will not force schools to become Academies, but there is no commitment to reversing the entire academy programme.

At the end of February, Newham council passed a resolution, hailed by the SWP, that said only that it “strongly discourages” academisation. It calls to “halt all steps towards academisation,” but only “until and unless there has been a binding parental and staff ballot.”



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