

Teachers at school in Sheffield, England, strike against job losses and threat to eliminate sixth form

Our reporters
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Teachers at Bradfield Secondary School in Sheffield, England, have begun a fightback against job losses and the attempt to close the school's sixth form.

Up to 40 teachers struck last Wednesday, triggered by the announcement that up to 15 teachers are to be made redundant in response to a financial deficit at the school.

The Bradfield School Board of Governors and the school headteacher insist that the school's sixth form (for post-16-year-olds) should be closed down, with the justification that student demand for it is lower than expected. Under the proposals, no new pupils will be admitted to the sixth form in September 2019.

The arguments used to justify the cuts are opposed by teachers, school staff and parents who say the financial shortfall has been long concealed and that the size of school management itself has grown significantly. It is expected that the school will end the present academic year £800,000 in debt. Although this figure is routinely attributed to issues concerning the school's sixth form, this cannot credibly account for such a fiscal crisis.

Bradfield is one of many schools nationally that operate under the academy programme. Academies are state-funded but privately run, and originated under the 1997-2010 Labour government.

Academisation is being zealously pursued by the Conservative government. Schools in the academy system are thrust into an "education market" and must "compete" against other education "providers" in order to survive.

The public consultation issued in January in support of the cuts notes: "The Bradfield School Sixth Form operates within a highly competitive market across Sheffield, pitching against exceptional and specialist providers. Many of these providers boast a large, specialist curriculum offer and student facilities against which any small sixth form would find it difficult to compete."

The document cites the fact that the school has been hit by funding cuts and has inadequate facilities, but only in order

to justify the sixth form closure. "Many of our own students, and those from other non-sixth form schools who could choose to attend Bradfield, instead choose to attend other sixth forms with larger capacity and dedicated student facilities, such as dining spaces and common rooms," it states.

It adds: "Even if we had succeeded in attracting 300 students into our sixth form, without the dedicated premises, we do not have the physical space to accommodate them. Our attempts over the years to secure capital funding to build a planned dedicated sixth form block have been unsuccessful."

Bradfield is constantly prey to the financial leeching effect of the Private Finance Initiative (PFI) programme. Under this, schools, hospitals and other public sector institutions have to hand over extortionate payments to private sector companies involved in the building and rebuilding of schools. On top of this is the recent announcement by the Association of School and College Leaders that there is a "£5.7 billion funding shortfall" nationally that could leave many schools bankrupt.

As a result, schools in many areas have cut pay and conditions of teaching staff as well as administration workers and slashed extra-curricular activities.

An indication of the opposition to the cuts at Bradfield was seen in the approximately 150 school staff, parents and supporters who gathered last Tuesday evening at the Niagara Club in the city to discuss the dispute and the strike that went ahead the following day.

The meeting heard speeches by three 17-year-old students at the school who spoke eloquently about the positive, supportive environment that had previously existed at the school—largely due to the dedication of the teaching staff—and the devastation they felt personally, and for their teachers, at the mooted closure of the sixth form.

School budget cuts being imposed nationally are the responsibility of the National Education Union (NEU) and

other education unions, which are playing a critical role in derailing any collective struggle against the slashing of budgets. This was confirmed yet again at the Sheffield meeting.

The NEU is the main union at the school, with its general secretary, Kevin Courtney, speaking at the meeting. Courtney is hailed by Britain's pseudo-left groups, which portray him as a militant fighter. But despite his occasional bluster, the NEU under his leadership has done nothing more than set up a website documenting school funding cuts.

Courtney offered no viable perspective for teachers to fight back, only stating that Bradfield's debt should be paid back, just not in one fell swoop. He said that the PFI company involved should agree to take smaller regular payments from Bradfield's budget!

Courtney reiterated the union's support for the Tories' bogus "fair funding formula" for schools, insisting it was ultimately down to the Theresa May government to step up to the mark. Almost a million pounds had been lost to Bradfield school since 2015 due to the cuts, he said, and the "the government has been incompetent, because it should have been looking at what's happening in this school and talking to the school management about it. And because government is incompetent, government deserves to look at this situation and try and help you put something right."

Reducing what is a national funding crisis—affecting education at all levels—to a local level, the NEU had nothing to say beyond asking those attending to write a letter to local Members of Parliament.

The disastrous implications of this refusal to mobilise the collective power of more than 460,000 NEU members to fight the funding cuts can be seen at any school in England. This week it was revealed that five teachers at a school in London, Furzedown Primary, have volunteered to take reductions of up to 20 percent of their pay (up to £7,000) in order to pay for two teaching assistants to keep their jobs. It is a devastating indictment of the failure of the education unions that some teachers feel they can do nothing but hand over thousands of pounds in hard earned salary in order to pay for the retention of staff.

In opposition to this bankrupt perspective, an international socialist perspective on education gained a warm hearing from those at the meeting.

Prior to the meeting, Socialist Equality Party (SEP) members distributed copies of the *World Socialist Web Site* articles "School funding crisis in England threatens children's basic education" and "The global struggle of teachers."

SEP member Richard Tyler spoke briefly and placed the Bradfield strike within the context of the unfolding international class struggle of teachers and other significant

sections of the working class.

Tyler concluded: "Teachers and parents need to take matters into their own hands by forming independent action committees that link up locally, nationally and globally. Because it's only really by putting an end to a system that puts the interests of the bankers and oligarchs before the mass of the people that you can expect to see a high quality education for all." This was received with warm applause from the audience.

Following the meeting, several parents and teachers spoke to SEP members and expressed an interest in the struggles of their coworkers internationally and support for a wider struggle to defend education.

The following day, WSWs reporters spoke to supporters on the picket lines outside Bradfield School.

Elena, originally from Germany and now a member of the University and College Union (UCU), said she had come to the picket line "to show solidarity with the teachers and to raise awareness of wider education cuts throughout the UK."

Elena spoke about last year's defeated national university lecturers strike in the UK against pension cuts, and how the attacks were "horrendous" and constituted "an attack on the future."

She said that teachers, lecturers and educators faced "increased work-loads" and were being used as "unpaid labour."

Elena also spoke of her experience of struggles by teachers in Germany: "Teachers have been striking recently, as well as academics. Research assistants have also taken action as they are really casualised." She concluded: "Not just the education struggles, but all workers struggles should be international. Absolutely."

Dave North, who had cycled from a nearby village, stopped on route to work to show his solidarity with the striking teachers. He said: "I agree one hundred percent with the strike because it's just not fair. People at the school are losing their jobs ... people are losing their incomes, and students are losing out as well on their education at the sixth form.

"Having been made redundant several times myself [as a carpenter and joiner], I know how people must feel."



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