

Teachers picket Labour-run council over COVID-19 safety victimisations

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Teachers from Oaks Park High School in East London picketed Redbridge Town Hall Wednesday, protesting the Labour-run council's decision to back school management over COVID-19 safety victimisations.

Around 20 teachers chanted, "Stop bullying Oaks Park staff!" and "Justice!" Their protest followed a strike and picket earlier that morning outside the school.

Teachers and support staff have taken part in four balloted strike days since June 15. They are opposing the victimisation and sacking of colleagues who invoked their rights to a safe workplace under Section 44 of the Employment Rights Act. Workplace victimisation has become entrenched during the pandemic, aimed at suppressing opposition to the Johnson government's herd immunity agenda that has claimed more than 150,000 lives.

Teachers at Wednesday's protest told the *World Socialist Web Site* that 26 staff members had asked to work from home at the start of January during a national lockdown and amid a surge of infections and deaths. Their requests under Section 44 were initially denied and four of the teachers have since had their employment terminated.

Redbridge Council, which Labour holds with an 81 percent majority, has sided openly with the Conservative government's Department for Education. In a letter sent to staff at Redbridge Borough Schools on May 19, Colin Stewart, the council's Director of Education and Inclusion, claimed there was "no evidence" of workplace victimisation or bullying at Oaks Park.

Stewart wrote, "we have reviewed the evidence base and are satisfied that the school's actions were not as a result of the submission of Section 44 letters, nor were they as a result of union rep activity and we are satisfied that subsequently, the school followed the correct procedure."

Kieran Mahon, a National Education Union (NEU) co-rep at Oaks Park High, strongly disagrees. He helped to organise Section 44 letters for vulnerable colleagues last year. He was sacked and frog-marched from the school grounds in May.

At Wednesday's protest, Mahon spoke with London bus driver David O'Sullivan who was also sacked for defending co-workers' health and safety rights under Section 44.

Mahon told O'Sullivan, "I was democratically elected as an Oaks Park High School co-rep on the 13th of December 2020,

and by the 5th of January I was advising and supporting members of our union to use Section 44 because our head teacher wanted to bring in all staff to teach from school even though the students weren't supposed to be in.

"By the 7th of May I was summarily dismissed on inflated and overblown charges, and I've lost my job, and we are currently on strike for bullying and intimidation at Oaks Park High School, and also victimization of a rep."

In the same week that Redbridge staff acted under Section 44, O'Sullivan had warned drivers about the spread of infections at Cricklewood bus garage. With hospitals in London threatened with collapse, Labour Mayor Sadiq Khan had declared a major incident in the capital, but teachers and key workers were left defenseless.

Mahon recalled that Redbridge borough (with a population of over 305,000) was placed under Tier 4 lockdown on December 19. The infection rate in London that week reached 224 per 100,000 people, while in Redbridge it rose to 363 per 100,000. On average, two to three Redbridge residents were dying from COVID-19 every day. On December 17, with a new strain of Covid ripping through schools, Education Secretary Gavin Williamson threatened legal action against three London councils, Greenwich, Islington, and Waltham Forest, unless they reversed their instructions that schools in their areas close a few days earlier for Christmas.

Redbridge Council's leader, Jas Athwal, issued a statement on December 19, claiming, "we cannot ignore the alarming rate the pandemic is now growing at in London and the southeast. The virus is rampant" and warning that any mixing with other households "could be devastating and result in a severe loss of lives."

Despite the clear and publicly stated risks, teachers at Oaks Park were instructed to report for duty. This was in line with the school reopening policy of the government throughout 2020, backed by the National Education Union and by Labour's Sir Keir Starmer who had declared last August that schools must reopen "no ifs, no buts, no equivocations."

Mahon explained the risks faced by teachers, "To give you some background, Oaks Park is a school of 2,000 children, and it has over 250-300 staff that our head teacher refused to let work from home. She wanted them all in the building. My

girlfriend was in her third trimester of pregnancy, and she expected me to come into a school with 300 staff members.

“Everything in my job at that time could have been done from home, and it would have kept my partner safe. After consultation with our regional reps, we advised that members could issue Section 44 [notices]. 26 members of staff did that—I was one of them—as well as my co-rep, Bill. Yes, it was very, very impactful, because they were too scared to come in. One of them who was pregnant was told to come in, another said she had an auto-immune disorder and was living with a parent with auto-immune disorder. She was told school was safe.

“Another said, ‘I’m worried about taking two trains and a bus to get into school.’ The response from the head teacher was, ‘But school is safe,’ missing the point that actually this teacher could pick up the illness on the way in, and spread it round the school, but also, she could pick it up herself and become ill, so it was completely ignored, ‘School is safe. I want you in.’

“On top of that, we then found out—and this is when I knew the head teacher did not have our best interests at heart—she intended to bring in 140 B-Tech [business and technology] students for face-to-face revision during the pandemic. It was at that point I knew I had to use Section 44.

“Not only did we have potentially 250+ staff members, but we would also have 140 B-Tech students, plus support. There could have been 350-400 humans in that building at the height of a virus that was spreading rapidly, and she wanted those people in. When we did Section 44, I can only describe what happened as a campaign of intimidation and fear. We joined the joint union risk assessment meeting. Of the six unions represented, only me and Bill were staff members. The rest were SLT [Senior Leadership Team], or certainly three of them were SLT members.

“They took turns having a go at us. She lectured us on how we’re not the employers, the local authorities are the employers. Her leadership team was aggressive, it was intimidatory, they kept interrupting Bill at times. I sat there, made notes, and just kept myself to myself. But it was extreme intimidation. After that, the members that used Section 44, twenty-six of them, started to receive phone calls and emails from the leadership team demanding to know why they thought school was unsafe, why it is that they can’t come and teach in school, etc., and they were told that their absence was considered to be an unauthorised absence.

“I’d like to add at this point that Section 44 is not refusing to work, it’s refusing to be in the building because it’s unsafe, and we were working from home at this time, teaching.”

With teacher opposition running high, NEU members in the region were balloted. Mahon recalled, “if the school remained open and the teachers were expected to come in, the region of Redbridge would go on strike. Very, very quickly the local authority backed down, and told the head teacher she should let staff work from home. That’s when the bullying continued, but

much more quietly... I was informed that I would be disciplined on a mistake I made over lockdown while teaching from home, while supporting a girlfriend who’s in her third trimester.

“Once my course work was assumed to be finished, and after I’ve graded it all and done all that hard work, they escorted me from the building in front of the kids. Members are on strike now for that.”

Mahon said the extent of staff victimisation was shocking, “A member of staff who had used Section 44 because she was pregnant, when she went to hand in her maternity pay forms was told, ‘sorry you’re on a fixed-term contract, no maternity leave for you. You won’t be employed further than that.’

“They made NQTs [Newly Qualified Teachers] go up against other NQTs for jobs and positions... They were set up against each other in interviews, but it just so happens that the ones who didn’t use Section 44 got the job, and those who did use section 44 happened to miss out on a job. Some of them have now been appointed to other positions... So, there’s four staff including myself who are facing the prospect of losing our jobs.”

Like other teachers at Wednesday’s protest, Mahon said he was disgusted with Labour’s opposition to the strike: “The unfortunate thing is that our local Labour MP is Wes Streeting, former Shadow Education Secretary, and he has completely backed and supported the head teacher. He spoke to the head teacher and said he was satisfied that they were not bullying people. He did not speak to the union or listen to our side of the story.

“It’s disgusting. I’m a Labour supporter—I was a Labour supporter. I will no longer be voting for Labour. I think we call it champagne socialists. I’m disgusted with Streeting. He is clearly a career politician and the fact that he cannot support, where Labour was backed by trade unions, shows how far the Labour Party have fallen in my opinion.”

Visit here to find out more and join the campaign for David O’Sullivan’s reinstatement. You can donate to O’Sullivan’s legal defence here .



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