

David O'Sullivan campaigns among striking teachers in East London

Sally Smith
24 June 2021

Sacked London bus driver David O'Sullivan joined striking teachers outside Oaks Park High School in East London on Tuesday. The teachers are demanding the reinstatement of four colleagues victimised for upholding health and safety rights during the coronavirus pandemic.

Teachers and support staff have held a series of one-day strikes at the school since June 15, with pickets outside the school gate.

This week, teachers picketed on Tuesday and Wednesday, with a three-day strike set to begin on June 29. There is growing anger among educators after the Labour-run local authority—London Borough of Redbridge—publicly attacked the teachers for striking. The teachers responded with a protest outside Redbridge Town Hall on Wednesday.

Amid a surge in Covid infections last winter, 26 teachers at Oaks Park High cited their rights under Section 44 of the Employment Rights Act and requested to work from home due to the threat of workplace transmission. Four teachers have since been victimised, including two National Education Union (NEU) co-reps at the school.

Teachers at Oaks Park used the same workplace safety legislation cited by O'Sullivan at Cricklewood bus garage in northwest London where Covid infections were spreading rapidly in early January. O'Sullivan was summarily dismissed for alerting colleagues to the spread of infections and informing them of their rights under Section 44.

At Tuesday's picket, O'Sullivan distributed copies of a leaflet, "Reinstate London bus driver David O'Sullivan: For a safe workplace against COVID-19! No to victimisations!" It was warmly received. Strikers readily drew the connection between the experiences of London bus drivers and teachers during the pandemic.

One teacher declared, "Well done for standing up for your health and safety rights." An intense discussion ensued as educators and support staff described the atmosphere in the school.

One teacher explained, "The bullying at Oaks Park High school has become outrageous. It's got to the point where the last resort is to strike. There was a letter to parents saying this was not the last resort—it has been. We have gone to the local authorities and got nothing. We have gone to the governors who just pushed our concerns away. We know parents have also contacted the governors, again nothing. So, this is a last resort, unfortunately. We are getting a lot of support from parents, we have the parents meeting on Thursday, which is excellent, so hopefully we get some more leeway with this.

"I know there have been other schools with concerns regarding Covid. That is why a lot of our teachers are out today. At Frederick Bremer school in Walthamstow where my nephew goes, about 40 percent of staff and students have got Covid or been exposed to it and the school has shut down today. It's still a problem, it's still an issue. We should not be still having this argument or this conversation later on, it is still a problem.

"There are probably around 35-40 teachers, support staff and other staff [on strike today]. That's enough to make a difference. This time round, compared to last week, we are much louder this time and we have had more parent contact than we did last week, and that is really good.

"There should be more involvement when we recruit school governors. No one seems to know how they are recruited. It would be nice for them to come to some of the meetings to actually hear what the teachers are concerned about, instead of hearing it from SLT

[Senior Leadership Team] and the head teacher. It would be great to have more parents involved in what happens in the school. I don't feel like parents know what's going on a lot of the time."

A teaching assistant (TA) outlined the health risks faced by teachers at the school: "As a TA there is no space to socially distance from the students. There was a situation where a TA had been sat next to a student doing her job and supporting them in the lesson. She went to our designated person who deals with Covid and said, 'this student has been taken home to self-isolate because he has been in contact with someone with Covid. I was sat next to him and I'm worried about this, what shall I do?' And she got a disciplinary for breaking the Covid rules. There is a mark against her name, and it's gone on file. When that happened, it made me feel like I need to keep my mouth shut. If I feel unsafe because of the working conditions, you get punished for stuff like that."

Another teacher explained: "For some reason they seem unable to distinguish between reasonable and fair and even helpful criticism and just attacking the school. There is no distinction. If you do raise something for whatever reason it is just perceived like outright trashing the school. It's not of course, it's raising a concern. You're not trying to force them out of their jobs, to undermine them or question their authority. It is just 'can we think about x, y and z' and it is perceived as an outright attack on the school."

Her colleague agreed: "People are on the 'bad list', and I think that people are put on that list if they raise a criticism and they come down very hard on you and that becomes the focus of everything. There are people who have been put on absent policy for having three days off in six months and you have got others who are in the pocket of the leadership who are popping out to do this and that, [and being asked] 'do you need any support', which is right, they should be supported, but others aren't."

Another teacher described how NEU rep Kieran Mahon was dismissed in retribution for defending teachers' health and safety rights, "Kieran as a new rep was good but there was one email where he shared information with people that was a bit of a retort [against teachers being forced into face-to-face teaching]. At the time I thought, 'ooh you just put a big target on your head'. The fact that I even thought that

is crazy. To have that lead to losing his job a few weeks later, that's just the most overwhelming evidence to me that there's something incredibly wrong with what is happening.

"To lose your job when previously you have an unblemished record is incredibly unfair. The way that happened, allowing someone to come into work while they were undergoing investigation and asked, 'oh can you do the exam grades for the kids before you leave' and then marched off site by the leadership team like some criminal. They escorted that person off site at lunch time in front of everybody. The headteacher took this person to a classroom, not a meeting room but a classroom. There was a class of children outside the room who were hanging around the corridor. The teacher was awkwardly popping their head around saying, 'shall I take these children somewhere else because you seem to be having quite a hostile meeting'. And then he was just taken off site."

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 .



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact