

UK: Support workers strike for living wage at Leicester Ash Field Academy SEND school

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Over 90 support workers including teaching assistants, administration workers and residential staff at Ash Field Academy in Evington, Leicester, have been striking through May-June to demand a living wage.

The Unison union members have been demonstrating at the roadside with banners and signs for 10 strike days and will continue their action this week and July 10-July 14 until the end of term.

Ash Field is a specialist school for children aged four to 19 who have complex medical conditions, serious physical disabilities, Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties (PMLD) and/or Moderate Learning Difficulties (MLD). Children come from Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland as well as out of area.

The teaching assistants (TA) and support workers face many challenges in their work due to the vulnerability of the children they care for.

The school was academised in 2012 and has consistently failed to apply government pay awards that have been negotiated through the National Joint Council (NJC). While Leicester City Council introduced enhanced pay scales for support workers in local authority (LA) maintained special education needs and disabilities (SEND) settings, Ash Field have refused to do so. In 2022, workers at Ash Field became aware of this disparity and entered into a pay dispute. The claim consists of three parts:

- A £3,000 pay increase to close the gap with SEND schools run by the Local Authority.
- The introduction of pay scales, so that pay becomes aligned with that of workers in comparable settings.
- The introduction of a pay supplement in recognition of those workers that take on additional medical responsibilities.

Considering the reserves Ash Field holds it is very

clear the academy is being run on a shoestring as far as staff wages are concerned. Academies are state funded but privately run. They do not have to adhere to the same standards as Local Authority schools and can decide how much to pay staff.

Ash Field's annual report and financial documents for the year ending August 2022 put their reserves at £2.73 million, amounting to five times the average reserves held by other academies in Leicester.

Strike action is being conducted separately by Unison from ongoing national strike action by the 20 teaching staff at the academy, who are members of the National Education Union (NEU). NEU members are striking again on Wednesday and Friday this week.

While there have been many messages of support from around the country, Unison has proposed no turn to rank-and-file workers in other schools or workplaces for solidarity strike action. Instead, the pro forma motion sent to union branches offering support states: "This branch recognises that: This strike action represents a critically important dispute in the ongoing struggle for fair pay for underpaid education support workers. UNISON members at Ash Field Academy are trailblazing the way forward for academies support workers by launching *a localised single employer industrial dispute over fair pay*" (emphasis added).

Without broadening the struggle and linking it to include the other ongoing disputes, such as the struggles of the teachers, postal workers and junior doctors, it is not possible to win the demands of the education workers at settings such as Ash Field Academy.

The fight cannot be left in the hands of the union bureaucracy. After months of determined struggle teachers have won nothing. Education workers must seize control of their struggle, democratically electing

rank-and-file committees in every workplace. The committees' first task must be to unify and expand the strikes across all sectors divided by the trade union bureaucracy, preparing a counteroffensive against the Tory-Labour policies of war, wage cuts and worsening social services and living conditions.

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to some of the 20 or so teaching assistants at their roadside demonstration on June 29, their 10th day of strike action.

Chris has been working as a teaching assistant at Ash Field for 12 years. He said "since the school achieved academy status, staff pay has fallen around £1,000 compared to teaching assistants in local authority-maintained schools. We are campaigning for equal pay scales, which we haven't had previously. We want parity with other schools.

"Also, we do a lot of medical procedures which we don't get any remuneration for, so we're campaigning for that. So far, we have had quite a few days on strike, and we will be on strike four days next week, and five days the week after, until the end of term."

Asked about the impact of the strike, Chris said, "I think there are further negotiations this Friday [June 30] with the local Unison rep. The academy has agreed to implement pay scales, which staff didn't have before, but this will not cover the cost of living and inflation. Action may carry on after the summer holidays, depending on how successful this action is."

Another teaching assistant, who asked to remain anonymous, described their role at the academy. "Our role entails anything from personal care, to educating children, to doing any movement and handling, and even some medical procedures. We must do from A to Z. As far as the child is concerned, we are responsible. The expectations and the responsibilities that are put on us are much higher than what the pay scales reflect.

"It's not just for the medical, we are taking responsibilities for the medical [interventions], but also [local authority] maintained schools get more than the average TA would be getting, so that's been an issue with Unison. The strike is to do with the fact that we want to get on a par with those levels of pay, but also, for those that do the extra, they want a little bit more as well for having that responsibility.

"At the end of the day, it is a responsibility, and the buck stops with you. So, if something were to happen,

it is not the senior leadership or the administrators that would be sitting there on your behalf, it would be you that is held responsible. That's where I think most members are finding it difficult, comparing salaries to a school setting. This is where Ash Field has always lacked in providing the right salaries. So this is to do with getting on a par with other schools, first of all, and secondly to pay for the [extra] responsibilities you are taking on.

The TA added, "We have a lot of support, but obviously there is going to be a financial loss for people, and there will be some people who will feel that pinch and they will need to go back. We do get a little bit of remuneration from Unison, but it doesn't cover everything, and obviously, with the way things are financially, people are now really struggling to get to the end of the month. So with this happening, they're having to cut their loss, and obviously there are some who will have children who they can't not send to school. It's a lot to be doing this, for everyone to stand here and take part.

"We just need them [the academy] to listen to what we've got to say. The thing is, it's an academy, and from what I understand, they are free to dish out the money as they wish, so they can decide how much to pay who within their academy. I think that really you are looking at them to have a bit of compassion for the people 'down there' at the bottom. So far, they have shown some by saying they will pay for the extra medical work people do, but as for the blanket increase, they don't seem to want to budge."



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