

Ash Field School support staff vote for strikes to oppose victimization of Unison rep Tom Barker

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School support workers at Leicester SEND school, Ash Field Academy have voted to strike in support of Unison rep Tom Barker who was summarily suspended from his role as a teaching assistant in October 2025.

The suspension took place days after members had voted to take industrial action against job losses.

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

UNISON members voted by 87 percent on a 57 percent turnout to support Barker's reinstatement. Ballot results were announced on March 20 but no date has been set for industrial action.

UNISON have denounced Barker's suspension as "union busting". The school support staff were involved in a prolonged and bitter dispute between April and November 2023 in which Barker was the local union representative. The teaching assistants took strike action for 43 days over eight months. The school was a single school Trust until 2024.

The Ash Field Trust, like many other academies, had consistently failed to apply government pay awards negotiated through the National Joint Council (NJC). The strike action in 2023 resulted in an 18 percent and 25 percent pay rise for classroom-based staff, and a £2,000 one-off payment for all support workers with a commitment from the employer to follow the NJC pay settlements.

Discovery Schools Academy Trust (DSAT) took over Ash Field Academy in March 2024, months after the end of the pay dispute, making it part of a Multi Academy Trust. While TUPE regulations (Transfer of Undertakings

(Protection of Employment) Regulations 2006) have protected pay and contractual terms—including the right to union membership for staff—the Trust consistently seeks to overturn these conditions. DSAT cites "operational issues" as well as budgetary demands to impose job losses and cuts.

Following the takeover, DSAT reduced staffing levels by not replacing staff that had left, justified as "natural wastage". In the summer of 2025, DSAT leaders launched a redundancy consultation that resulted in further 10 percent loss of mostly frontline workers, worsening workload stress for remaining staff.

Teaching Assistants and support staff voted to strike after nine redundancies were announced in October 2025, with 86 percent supporting strike action. DSAT leaders responded by withdrawing the redundancies and restoring staffing to 2024 levels and agreeing not to impose further redundancies for 12 months. Barker was suspended three days after the strike vote. Staff had insisted that Barker's suspension be overturned as part of the agreement over redundancies, which the Trust has refused.

DSAT claimed that Barker's suspension was due to an alleged incident on October 29, 2025. However, in emails obtained by Barker in a Subject Access Request—the independent investigating officer reported that there was no case to answer and recommended lifting the suspension. DSAT did not follow the recommendation. On January 12, 2026, DSAT asserted that Barker's suspension was to protect the integrity of an investigation into another incident, a grievance. A different investigator was assigned to this which concluded in February 2026, and Barker remained suspended. The Trust has now appointed a new investigator from a separate organisation to investigate further.

The suspension is aimed at silencing opposition to the

drastic cuts being planned and implemented throughout the education sector. There has been a significant growth of industrial action nationwide against academy Trusts who after decades of bumper profits now face deficits in their budgets, with 55 percent predicted to be in deficit.

Rising costs and depleted school budgets have seen a significant increase in redundancies and pay cuts of up to 20 percent and a restructuring of pay grades for thousands of TA's across the sector. 50 percent of schools reported cutting teaching assistants (2025) and 55 percent reported cutting support staff overall. Almost three quarters (74 percent) of school leaders expected TA cuts in 2025-2026.

The actions of DSAT demonstrate that the defense of wages, jobs and conditions will be a bitter battle, necessitating unified action across the sector in defense of jobs and conditions.

This is not the perspective of the trade unions. Unison have yet to announce a strike date; their aim is to use the strike mandates to strengthen their negotiating position. Having accepted the offer of no further redundancies for now, called off strike action and organised a separate ballot against the victimisation, they have strengthened the hand of management. The National Education Union (NEU) at Ash Field, while sending letters of opposition, have not mobilised their members against either job losses or the victimization of Barker.

The NEU held eight days of strike action in January against the Arthur Terry Learning Trust (ATLP) across the Midlands. Again, they defied a mandate for nine further days of action accepting the employers pledge to stop redundancies and to work with the union to impose the cuts. ATLP stated that the NEU recognise "the significant financial challenges facing ATLP" and agreed that "action must be taken to ensure the financial recovery of the trust."

Unison is playing the same role. Strikes are called to insist that employers must work with the unions to impose cuts in a managed way, as a mean to ensure control over working class resistance to austerity. The Labour government has cut £1 billion in funding to education alone this last financial year, with the key focus on increasing its war and rearmament budgets.

Its recent White Paper, "Every Child Achieving and Thriving", proposes an overhaul of the rights of children with SEND to access education over the next decade. The measures will remove the statutory right of hundreds of thousands of children to receive necessary support, slash funding, and offload SEND provision onto cash-strapped schools and exhausted teachers.

Educators must mobilise their collective and independent strength against this offensive and in opposition to the trade union bureaucracy who drive every dispute down a blind alley of appeals to employers and the government.

The outrage expressed by several unions to Barker's suspension is hot air to cover their complicity in imposing austerity and privatization of public services.

A public meeting and rally was held on February 18 organised by the Leicester and District Trades Union Council to call for Barker's reinstatement. Among the speakers in support was Zarah Sultana, MP for Coventry South and a leading light within Your Party along with Jeremy Corbyn. Sultana said that the decision to suspend Barker was an attack on the right to protest, adding, "An attack on one is an attack on all. Let's fight back, let's stand up together and let's show that working class people won't be silenced, intimidated, or pushed aside."

But so far, the sentiment to "fight" has led only to 400 trade unionists, plus new UNISON General Secretary Andrea Egan and 20 members of UNISON's National Executive Council, signing an open letter to demand Barker's reinstatement. Not a single union is mobilising against cuts or the anti-strike laws that block workers from mounting a struggle and the victimisations of their own members.

The suspension of Barker must be lifted and a unified campaign launched to oppose the decimation of state education. The drive to privatisation, cuts in education spending and the defense of the basic democratic right to organise in the workplace can only be fought by the building of independent rank and file committees.



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