

Ash Field Teaching assistants in Leicester, UK continue strike in defense of union rep, Tom Barker

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12 May 2026

Support staff at Ash Field Academy in Leicester—a Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) school—took the first day of strike action on April 30 in a dispute over the reinstatement of workplace union representative Tom Barker. Two further strike days by the UNISON members are scheduled for May 13 and 14.

Barker was suspended from the school in October 2025, only days after members had voted to take industrial action against job losses and staff restructuring at Ash Field by his employer, Discovery Schools Academy Trust (DSAT). As a Multi Academy Trust, DSAT comprises 20 schools: 15 primary schools, four specialist provisions, and one secondary school.

UNISON opened a formal industrial action ballot over Barker’s suspension on February 18 this year with the ballot closing on March 18. Members voted by 87 percent on a 57 percent turnout to support Barker’s reinstatement.

When DSAT took over Ash Field Academy from the single school trust in 2024, DSAT reduced staffing levels by not replacing staff that had left, justified as “natural wastage”. Last summer DSAT leaders launched a redundancy consultation that resulted in a 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. By ending

the dispute, UNISON strengthened the hand of management, enabling them to launch a vindictive campaign against Barker in an attempt to block future opposition to inevitable cuts in order to meet budgetary demands.

The school support staff were also 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 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 National Joint Council pay settlements.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with staff on the picket on the first day of strike action. There were some 20 support workers and Teaching Assistants (TA’s) on the picket with a few local UNISON reps, and representatives from Leicester and District Trades Union Council. The Independent MP for Leicester South, Shockat Adam made a brief appearance. The names of staff have been changed for their protection.

Fatima explained: “We are here to support Tom Barker, who’s been a UNISON rep in our school for many years. He was there for us, so now we are there for him.” Fatima linked Barker’s victimisation to the strike action taken in 2023 to defend their working conditions during the merger of Ashfield Academy in 2024 with DSAT’s current efforts to impose job losses. “Because he fought for us in 2023, now, we do not have any reps in school. So, if anything goes wrong, we don’t have anybody and we feel unsafe.

“We still don’t know the reason why Tom has been

removed. They should tell us what was wrong. I don't think he would have done anything wrong, to do something serious, to be suspended. No, it just doesn't make sense to me."

Alice said: "I'm here for Tom, because I feel like he's been dismissed for the wrong reasons. The way that it's been going on for six months now, and they've not come up with anything that is structural, to get rid of him, is wrong. They obviously haven't got anything there, and they're just dragging it on. Tom has got all the TA staff supporting him." Alice agreed that the strike should be broadened: "I hope so, and it's not just because of this time, we all feel like this could happen to us as well at a later date. You know, if we do something that's not right, are they going to come back on us and get rid of us as well?"

"Something just needs to be done, doesn't it? They're cutting jobs back. And this is what it's like here to be honest with you. You're getting rid of staff. We've got staff off, and basically, they're not replacing them. We were working extremely hard, and we don't seem to be getting any joy out of it."

Sanjit said "It will need more support from all the schools. Just now they [management] were talking about the TA's wages being lower, very low again and we don't know what is happening, we feel so lost without Tom in school."

Karen and Michell said: "They [management] have the responsibility to the welfare of all their staff, and that includes Tom." Both believed Tom was victimised because: "He's outspoken, and he stands up against what's wrong. I think that's why they targeted him." They explained that having been taken over by a Multi Academy Trust, the school management have been strengthened and "that's probably why they joined the trust [DSAT] in the first place."

"It's always the front line staff that suffer the most, when it comes to redundancies, Last time [in 2023] when it was about pay, it's a bit stomach turning when you're told they can't afford to pay you a fair wage when you know people are there earning a wage way more than you do."

By removing their rep Karen and Michelle said: "They've took our voice away, and that's what their whole aim is. They tried to take our voice away from us, and we need to get our voice back."

As the WSWs explained in its previous article on

Barker's suspension: "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."

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 including the leader of UNISON, Andrea Egan, the largest trade union with 1.3 million members, is hot air to cover their complicity in imposing austerity and privatisation of public services.

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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