Reinstate victimised UNISON rep Tom Barker at Ash Field school: Defend the right to organise

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3 November 2026

In a blatant act of victimisation for trade union activity, Ash Field Academy special school in Leicester has announced the dismissal of UNISON trade union representative and teaching assistant Tom Barker on September 29 following an 11-month investigation.

Teaching assistants who are members of UNISON will take strike action on November 4, marking 16 days of action in his defence and to demand the overturning of his dismissal.

Barker was suspended in October 2025 just days after organising a ballot for strike action over low staffing levels which raised safety concerns for children and staff alike. During his 11-month suspension Barker was subject to three separate investigations, seven interviews, and a hearing which lasted a total of 15 hours.

UNISON insists that Barker has been victimised for his role in the previous strike vote and that Discovery Schools Academy Trust (DSAT), which runs Ash Field Academy, has penalised him for union activity.

The Trust has not revealed the nature of the allegations against Barker, who has launched an appeal against the dismissal. A mass picket will be held outside the school calling on solidarity across trade unions and the community in his defence during the strike on November 4.

UNISON Leicester City branch secretary Sam Randfield, said: “UNISON has been clear throughout this extraordinarily drawn-out investigative process: we consider the allegations against Tom to have been made in bad faith, and we don’t believe the evidence supports the Trust’s decision.

“Rather, we consider these acts to be vindictive attempts to punish UNISON members at Ash Field for pushing back against dangerously deep cuts to the workforce.”

Following the last strike action, comments leaked to the press have been circulating since June in an attempt to discredit Barker, although the allegations against him were not made public. The allegations and rumours claimed that Barker bullied and harassed staff at the school. UNISON issued a lengthy statement challenging these claims on June 12.

The UNISON statement establishes the direct link between efforts of the academy to slash jobs and impose redundancies, the campaign of staff to fight it and Barker’s victimisation. In the summer term of 2025, DSAT announced plans to slash several student-facing jobs at Ash Field. These cuts, on top of staff not replaced previously, amounted to about 10 percent of the student-facing workforce.

Despite concerns raised by staff and Barker regarding the health and safety impact of the cuts, DSAT refused to change course. Several staff were to be made redundant as a result. In autumn 2025 staff voted for strike action, which Barker organised.

The UNISON statement explains: “Just days after the Trust received the results of this strike ballot, Tom was suspended from work pending investigation of unspecified allegations. This turned out to be the first of three investigations. The first one, into the allegations on which Tom was initially suspended, resulted in no case being found against him. The second one, which was apparently conducted under the grievance policy, has concluded, but Tom has not been provided with the outcome report. The third one is ongoing; we understand that it is examining some of the same things as the second investigation, but this time under the disciplinary policy.” It is this third investigation which has now resulted in Barker’s dismissal with allegations that Barker posed a “danger to staff and students” relayed through staff at the school and through social media discussions.

UNISON did not act on the initial ballot as the school withdrew its redundancy notices but did not drop Barker’s suspension. Instead, the union organised a petition calling for the school to allow Barker to continue to work during the investigation. DSAT ignored the petition and Barker’s full

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suspension was upheld. It was only after this that UNISON organised a formal ballot for strike action, held in February 2026, where teaching assistants (TAs) voted overwhelmingly to strike in solidarity with Barker and in defence of their right to organise. The calling of the initial strike only strengthened the hand of management as the union were eager to show that they can be worked with. Single day strikes over a period of 11 months, whilst causing some disruption, is seen as an acceptable annoyance by management who have a broader agenda in imposing even further cuts ahead.

Barker was also the union representative who led strike action against the school in 2023 when it was going through a forced academisation. The process saw DSAT move to slash jobs and working conditions and impose inferior contracts. The strike action in 2023 resulted in pay rises of 18 and 25 percent 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 pay awards.

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. The academy, like many schools across the UK, is under continuing budgetary pressures.

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 TAs 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 victimisation of Barker is an attempt to stifle any opposition to this agenda. The actions of DSAT demonstrate that the defence of wages, jobs and conditions will be a bitter battle, necessitating unified action across the sector.

This is not the perspective of the trade unions. Andrea Egan, UNISON's General Secretary, stated when she visited the Ash Field pickets in June: "If they are going to take us on, they are not taking Tom on, they are not taking members on, they are taking on this union." UNISON is the largest trade union in the UK with a membership of 1.3 million. Egan could mobilise the union's membership in the education sector (numbering hundreds of thousands) in a campaign against management intimidation, but instead tub-thumping statements are issued which signify nothing by way of rallying its mass membership.

At the union's national conference held in June, under conditions of a massive agenda of austerity and cuts across the education sector and public services to fund war, it offered nothing but to "pressure" the outgoing Starmer Labour government to change course. This has continued under Prime Minister Andy Burnham whose government pledged billions more to military spending in last week's Budget to be gained by cutting spending across the public sector. The Budget strips £310 million from the Department for Education's capital spending between 2026/27 and 2029/30, threatening investment in already deteriorating school buildings, essential repairs, refurbishment and new facilities.

The conference took place amid Barker's victimisation but discussion on his case and those of other trade union reps facing similar treatment was suppressed on the conference floor. Delegates were repeatedly shut down as they attempted to raise individual cases of victimisation.

The debate on Motion 4, Oppose and Fight Trade Union Victimisation, called for a campaign to be launched against the silencing of union reps in the workplace. Speakers revealed how reps are often subjected to bullying, disciplinary procedures, excessive workloads and attempts to undermine their authority. But the conference chair refused to allow any of the speakers to mention those fighting trade union victimisation, claiming it would "jeopardise their cases". Natasha from Leicester City branch was cut off at the mic for speaking about the campaign against the victimisation of Tom Barker.

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

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 defence 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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