

Comprehensive education under attack

Jane Nellist
Coventry NUT, personal capacity

This year was supposed to be a special year for Coventry - a celebration of 50 years of comprehensive education in the city. Coventry was at the forefront of the development of comprehensive education with a non-selective, inclusive education system with a strong local authority which planned local education.

Instead, it has turned into a battle to save our schools with eight out of the 17 secondary schools in the city declaring an intention to seek to become an academy, with more likely to follow (two are already academies under the old system introduced by Labour).

In Coventry, a strong campaign to defend our schools has been built in the city with teachers, students and local communities joining together. We have a Save Our Schools group. Teachers have been out in the local communities leafleting and petitioning and letting parents know of the dangers to their children's education if we 'lose' these schools.

Teachers have taken strike action, with more to come. The community is just waking up to the threats posed to local education. The Labour council is being forced to come out and voice its concerns due to the pressure that is building up from teachers and trade unions.

All over the country, communities are beginning to realise that academies mean privatisation of our schools.

The Labour government introduced academy schools, which are

publicly funded but independent schools. And the Con-Dem government has ratcheted this up with a much speedier process where, in some cases, schools have been transferred without staff even being aware that it was happening. Schools are literally being seized from local community control with little or no consultation.

The vast majority of schools in this country have not applied to become academies but since last year there has been a big increase, with now over 700 schools converted to academy status.

One of the main reasons that governors are giving for seeking academy status is money. They believe they will get more money as an academy, but there actually isn't any extra money in the system. However academy schools do get more control of the total budget of running a school, with direct access to funding that would have gone to the local authority. The danger with this is that, while they may appear to have more money, the governors also take on much more risk as well. You really have to ask yourself if governors are up to the task of taking on the risk of running multi-million pound budgets as businesses.

As well as the risk to their own schools, there is a risk to all of the other schools in the local authority. If a proportion of this funding is taken out from the central services it destabilises those services and we all lose out! This all has a profound impact on the services that all of our schools rely on including primary, nursery and special schools.

Just recently, the government has



Tile Hill Wood teachers on strike against turning the school into an academy photo Coventry SP

announced a consultation on admissions which starts to expose the real views of the Tories.

Having temporarily deserted their favoured policies of grammar schools and selective education for one of academies and free schools, this consultation still allows schools to band the intake of students.

They are also encouraging and allowing academies to admit more pupils from deprived backgrounds who are eligible for the £430 pupil premium, much-needed extra funding. You can see the advantage, when school budgets are tight, of admitting more bright poor kids who carry a bit more funding. Very soon we get selection straight through the front door!

The Tories don't change their spots, they may try and camouflage themselves but what is happening to our state education, just as with the NHS, is privatisation.

I don't want to have to have to re-fight those battles that were fought over 50 years ago to win comprehensive education and all the gains that came with it, we need to defend our schools and stop the alien invasion of academies into our school system now!

Spreading to primaries?

Education secretary Michael Gove's latest headline-grabbing wheeze is to convert 200 "failing" primary schools into academies. This is due to happen in September 2012, when in some cases, a new headteacher will be brought in.

But what Gove describes as "a helping hand upwards" for staff in the academies, in practice has meant bullying by headteachers, sacking of staff and chaos and confusion for staff and pupils. Spreading the pernicious policy of academies into primary schools means the destruction of the comprehensive school system.

The Socialist demands:

- Free, publicly run, good quality education, available to all from nursery to university.
- Give schools the resources to meet every child's needs. Bring class sizes down to a maximum of 20.
- Big business out of education. No to PFI. No to the commercialisation and privatisation of education.
- No to academies and trust schools. For democratic local education authorities (including representatives elected from staff, parents and secondary school students) to control and plan the running of all schools.
- No to selection. For all schools to follow common comprehensive admissions procedures agreed across each local authority.
- For community schools run by democratic governing committees, with paid time off to allow parents' representatives to attend. Headteachers to be elected from the teaching staff.
- End National Curriculum testing (SATs) and school league tables. For a broad and balanced school curriculum that can engage and develop every young person.

Keep Tidemill in public hands

Concerned parents at Tidemill school in Deptford, south London, have persuaded local Labour MP Joan Ruddock to write to Tory education secretary Michael Gove, asking him to delay approval of headmaster Mark Elms' plans to make their school an academy.

Last year anti-academy 'Deptford says no' campaigners got an extension to the consultation period by uncovering significant miscalculations in the financial figures Elms and his school govern-

ors used. However the governors have made a fresh application and are awaiting Gove's consent.

But the school's accounts have not been audited since early 2009 and no audit trail can be found of the huge bonuses for 'super-head' Elms, agreed in 2009 and 2010. The parents want independent scrutiny by the local education authority of its arrangements for managing its finances. Most of all they want to keep Tidemill in public hands.

Coleg Morgannwg Victory over victimisation

Members of the University and College Union (UCU) at Coleg Morgannwg in south Wales have announced that college management has withdrawn disciplinary charges

against Morgannwg lecturer and UCU Cymru president Guy Stoate.

Guy had been accused of "bullying" for calling a worker who crossed a picket line in March a scab. Manage-

ment have also backed down from threats to punish trade unionists at the college who took action supporting Guy.

A spontaneous walkout of 70 of the college's lecturers and preparations for industrial action against college management were reinforced by a pledge of assistance from the UCU's national congress.

UCU Cymru's full-time employees also stood strong, refusing to repudiate support for Guy when college management demanded it. Coleg Morgannwg management were quick to retreat when the scale of the forces opposing them became apparent.

UCU members at the college can now focus their attention on the immediate tasks facing workers in further education in Wales: preparations for the 30 June strike, a Wales-wide deal protecting education jobs and the fight against cuts in courses and student support.



Barnsley lecturers fight job cuts

UCU members at Barnsley College were on strike on 17 June against attacks by bullying management that could see a quarter of the academic staff lose their jobs.

Picket lines were solid, and there was very sizeable student solidarity. The strike was followed by a UCU meeting of over 40.

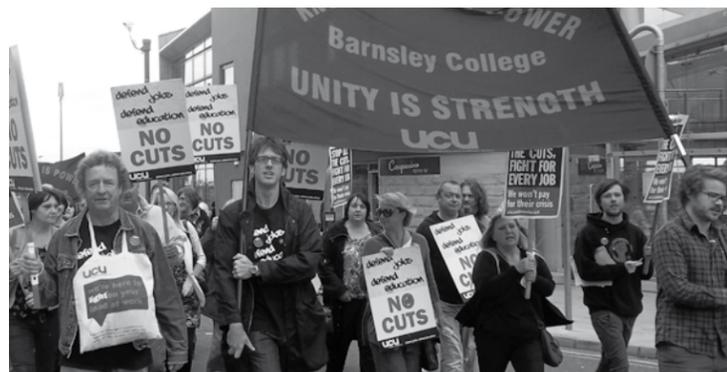
Management at Barnsley college has been provocative. Lecturers have been forced to re-apply for their jobs on worse terms, conditions, and pay, and have not got their jobs

back when they've re-applied!

If these job losses go through, management will cut student courses and education further in future. Support staff organised in Unison and Unite are facing job losses too but they have not been balloted for strike action alongside the UCU.

On 18 June there was a solidarity march in support of the striking lecturers. The next strikes will be on 28 and 30 June and 6-7 July.

Ian Pattison
Yorkshire Socialist Party



Marching on 18 June photo Yorkshire SP

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