

Suffolk Tories in retreat?

Roger MacKay
Ipswich & District TUC

An article in the Guardian on 5 May proclaimed that "a Tory local council has halted controversial 'virtual council' plans to outsource all its services, after public opposition to spending cuts and a collapse in staff morale triggered a political revolt by backbenchers."

The article later refers to Suffolk as the "first big Tory rank-and-file mutiny over unpopular spending cuts in local government". However, a closer examination of the facts seriously questions such statements.

Without a doubt, public opposition to Suffolk county council's (SCC) New Strategic Direction (NSD), as the cuts programme was grandly titled, has been consistent since last summer.

There has been a weekly collection of signatures on petitions against the cuts in Ipswich, regular public meetings, local media attention, pickets of council meetings and in November, a march of 1,000 people. The government's attacks on young people and then SCC's announcement of the closure of 29 of its 44 public libraries made instant headlines.

With support from the civil servants' union, PCS, the teachers' union, NUT, public sector union, Unison and particularly from Unite, eight coaches took campaigners from Ipswich and the surrounding area to the massive TUC demo on 26 March.

When the ex-London banker Tory leader of SCC as well as two



Unison members protest on 26 March photo Paul Mattsson

other leading executive officials resigned in the middle of April, at the same time as the suspected suicide of a third, the new leader-elect, promoted as 'a good old Suffolk boy' spoke of the saving of "the school crossing patrols and a pause to... give an opportunity to review everything."

The local press then began a campaign calling for the NSD to be "dumped in the dustbin of history"!

Further announcements from top Tory councillors maintained they were listening to the public and changes were to be made - the NSD was in tatters, the press wrote!

On 5 May, the local free paper proclaimed: "Libraries are saved

after another u-turn". However, further down the same article it said "the council is to set up a 'community interest company' to organise the running of the county libraries". That sounds like an 'arms-length company' to us, or privatisation by 'sleight of hand' as Len McCluskey, general secretary of Unite told the Glasgow May Day rally.

Then we read the 'small print' and learnt that no actual decisions would be made until 26 May - a good three weeks after local election day. In other words, with plenty of time to plan for any eventuality!

If this is an example of how the Tory party and the media played its hand across the country lead-

ing up to polling day, then it's little surprise the Tories were being congratulated on a brilliant campaign as they retained their core councils in the South and left the Lib Dems to pay the price for Tory cuts elsewhere.

In Suffolk we expect the NSD to be renamed, the programme to be repackaged and Andrea Hill, the notorious top earning council chief executive, to be made the sacrificial lamb.

But the campaign against the cuts will continue - we've seen off one lot of Tory leaders, now it's time to take on the next. Our public sector workers will be leading the way this summer.

Fast news

For sale: university places

Tory education minister David Willetts' latest crackpot idea to make more money out of young people's education is to allow universities to charge rich students more for extra places. The suggestion is that the best universities could open up more places and charge some British students as much as international students, who sometimes pay five or six times as much. They wouldn't be eligible for any student loan, meaning it would only be an option for the richest few. Willetts, trying to pass this off as something that will help poorer students, has said that this will leave spaces free for others. In reality this is just a way for the rich to buy their way around the shortfall of university places and yet again puts those with money at a huge advantage for continuing to higher education.

NUS executive to Labour councillor

Aaron Kiely, who was recently elected to the National Executive Committee of the National Union of Students, has now also been elected as a Labour councillor in Ockendon ward in Thurrock. Despite calls by Socialist Students and others, Aaron did not commit to a programme of voting against cuts if elected councillor. The government is slashing public services and many votes for Labour express an opposition to the cuts programme. But unfortunately the record of Labour councillors is far from convincing on this score. So far, no Labour councillor on a Labour-led council has voted against cuts. Students, just like everyone else, need political representatives to stand up for their interests and support their struggles. Student representatives must oppose all cuts, not just those in education. Only by taking this principled stand can a movement be built which can defeat attacks on education.

Ben Robinson

Mullion Youth and Community Centre to close

On 29 March the trustees and staff at Mullion Youth and Community Centre (MYCC) were informed that the charity running it was going into administration and that the centre would be closed at the end of the day three days later! At a public meeting about MYCC on 16 March, local Conservative councillor Carolyn Rule, who is close to the longest standing trustee at the centre, insisted that the centre just needed some assistance to keep it going - all it would take was a disco and table-top sale here and there. A 'friends of' group was established and people signed up to 'do their bit'.

The councillor also told the 50-strong audience that the centre, which houses the only nursery in Mullion, the largest village in Cornwall, and the only provision outside schools for youth on the peninsula, would not get any assistance from Cornwall council. Apparently, "if the community wouldn't run it, the community wouldn't have it".

Lee Dunkley

Students occupy against cuts at London Met

Claire Laker-Mansfield
National organiser, Socialist Students

On 4 May 30 students began an occupation of London Metropolitan University in defence of courses and services there. Lecturers and other staff also entered the occupation bringing solidarity and offering their support to the students.

The cuts that management wish to make at London Met will devastate the university. 70% reductions are planned to course budgets and many students face the looming threat of having to be transferred to other universities to complete courses that are to be discontinued.

Rather than defending its students the management of London Met has chosen to do the bidding of the Con-Dem coalition, passing on their brutal package of cuts and fee rises. But the demands of those students occupying the graduate centre at the university were very clear: not one cut at London Met!

The occupiers were, in the main, students who are themselves facing course cuts. Many were students studying for a performing arts degree. Disgracefully, the university is planning to sell the studios used by these students to private companies. It's rumoured that students studying this course will then be asked to transfer to other institutions, potentially some distance away.

Edmund Schluessel spoke to the

London Met occupiers. They were evicted just before midnight on 9 May. John Hughes, a second year student in sociology and international development, one of the courses at risk, described the entry of the police into the occupation, which took place around 11.40pm Monday night:

"They came straight in the door. There was no warning. We were served the injunction on the spot by two county court sheriffs, four police officers, ten bailiffs and one member of London Met security. We were given ten minutes to read it and take our stuff."

Around 2.30am the previous morning, occupiers say private security staff kicked open the doors and entered an area where people were sleeping. John also said that private security have been sexually harassing and verbally intimidating the occupiers.

"One of the members of the security team said to one woman through the doors, 'you should put up a picture of yourself, something that's more sexy' and 'I'm quite a big bloke and if I wanted to come into the occupation I would. Two young ladies are not going to stop me.'"

The fightback that has begun at London Met can act as an inspiration to students and workers in higher education all over the country. As university managements attempt to pass on cuts and fee rises, students and workers should demand that they refuse to do the Con-Dems'



photo Senan

dirty work and instead pass needs budgets, based on what the university population requires to run effectively, without raising fees.

As well as student protests, industrial action by education workers will be necessary in order to

take the campaign forward. On 30 June, if workers (including teachers and lecturers) take strike action to defend jobs and services, students must join their picket lines and demonstrations in solidarity to help fight all cuts.

Join the Jarrow march for jobs

This October Youth Fight for Jobs will be marching from Jarrow to London to protest against rising unemployment, fees and cuts and to demand the right to a future for young people. The march will start in Jarrow, south Tyneside on 1 October and arrive in London on 5 November with protests as the march goes through towns along the route. It commemorates the 75th anniversary of 200 unemployed men from Jarrow marching the same route.

See www.jarrow2london2011.wordpress.com and www.youthfightforjobs.com for more information or if you are able to march, raise money or organise a protest.