



Tower Hamlets

Class Struggle

A Workers' Liberty education workers' bulletin

www.workersliberty.org • awl@workersliberty.org • 0207 394 8923

Threat of strikes forces climb-down at Bishop Challoner

By a teacher

As reported in the previous issue of *Class Struggle* (September-October 2012), teachers at Bishop Challoner school in East London voted to strike in opposition to a threat from the headteacher to impose a “mock” Ofsted inspection.

Bishop Challoner teachers had previously voted not to co-operate with or participate in any such inspection or observation, as part of the ongoing industrial action by the NUT and NASUWT teaching unions.

Following the strike vote, a series of one-sided “negotiations” followed, consisting of the head sending out a series of increasingly embarrassed emails in which what had initially been presented as a compulsory inspection was first reduced to a partial observation, then a voluntary opt-in process for individual departments, then a voluntary opt-in process for individuals (i.e. teachers could opt out even if their departments opted in), then something that would only

affect senior management.

A meeting on Tuesday 9 October agreed that, while positive, the climb-down was not to be trusted. Workers were also angered by the head’s attempt to divide staff on the basis of department or grade. The 9 October meeting again voted overwhelmingly to strike if any observations of any description went ahead.

Throughout the entire process there was no communication from the headteacher to union reps in the school. She consistently attempted to either ignore or bypass the democratically-elected representatives of her own employees.

NEGOTIATE

Eventually, she agreed to negotiate with the union at a regional level but it was not clear whether school reps would be allowed to participate in the meetings.

However, regional NUT reps insisted that a school rep attend. Having previously cancelled a meeting with school reps, the head then dismissed official communication from the school NUT group to her as “anonymous emails”.

A new proposal has emerged from negotiations, which is for a “paired inspection” rather than a mock Ofsted.

This would only be possible if the school adopts an observation protocol in line with NUT policy. Given the underhand behaviour of management throughout this dispute, and the head’s consistent refusal to communicate openly with union reps in the school, school reps are insisting that members vote on participation in any observation or inspection process before it takes place.

The experience at Bishop Challoner school shows that teachers have enormous strength and power. Simply taking a stand in a meeting sent our head into a tailspin and forced a series of embarrassing climb-downs. Other teachers across the country can do the same as part of the NUT/NASUWT action; you’ll be surprised how much you can achieve.

Ultimately, we have the power because we make the schools run. We, and not the senior managers, are responsible for delivering our pupils’ education.

Fight union busting at Stratford Academy!

All teachers at Stratford Academy in Newham were asked to sign a letter from their head by Friday 19 October saying that they will NOT be taking part in any action short of strike action.

This applies whether the employee is a member of the NUT, NASUWT, ATL — or no union at all!

Those not returning the signed letter will face a daily 15% pay deduction — the head’s estimate of how much of their duties will have NOT been done!

Clearly, the NUT will challenge this nonsense legally, but in the short term NUT members have got the go-ahead for a strike asap.

In order to bolster the staff’s confidence in taking such strike action — which may turn out to be prolonged — it is urgent that messages of support start arriving immediately.

The rep is Steve Charles and his email is stevec4151@aol.com

Please circulate far and wide! This is happening in the neighbouring borough to us — we could be next!



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Learning, or just learning to pass exams?

(*Class Struggle* prints this article from a south London teacher as a contribution to the debate about exams, testing, and "achievement" in education. Have your say: email us at awl@workersliberty.org with the subject line 'TH Class Struggle')

One recent Wednesday, a planned lesson with my year 9s had to be postponed when I was told at very short notice that I had to attend a meeting of a group called PiXL.

PiXL is a so-called not-for-profit educational consultancy organisation based around its guru-type leader, Sir John Rowling, a former headteacher with links to the Emmanuel Schools Foundation, whose academies got into trouble a few years ago for teaching creationism in science lessons. PiXL is dedicated to helping the schools in its "club" (members of which pay it thousands of pounds a year) improve their GCSE results.

The PiXL approach to improving results was revealed as the meeting went on. Far from it being the advised opportunity to share ideas, we got a long lecture-cum-rally from Rowling and one of his protégés, a young headteacher from Sutton.

BORDERLINE

PiXL believe in a focus on C/D borderline students, via excessive data management techniques to see the "progress" students are making toward passing the exam.

They also want to overwork teachers with endless lunchtime and after-school sessions targeting a very small number of pupils (what about all the others?); and stressing out students by re-entering them over and over again, at every possible opportunity, during year 10 and 11 in the hope that their results will improve. This is supposed to be all about the students and their best interests, but their learning needs are never discussed, only the need to "diagnose" the reason they can't pass the exam and then offer them the "therapy" they need — not the most helpful language!

What PiXL really represent is the pathetic if understandable desire in schools to carve out an extra 1% of the available "pie" of GCSE passes as individual institutions.

At one point Rowling said that his view was that as 60% appeared to be the figure "allowed" to pass this year, we should be assuming that only 59% will be allowed to pass next year and we should be guessing grade boundaries, etc, on that basis. It was both frustrating and depressing to see ranks and ranks of qualified teachers sitting in the hall listening to this without questioning the horrendous assump-

tions behind it.

Teacher trade unions and the labour movement in general are a long way from leading a proper public discussion of these issues and it is vital that we fight for them to do so. I feel that an immediately winnable demand to campaign around would be the abolition of exams at 16; especially as not all students are expected to remain in full time education until 18, writing 40% of them off as failures at 16 should be obviously unjustifiable to almost everybody in society.

PiXL's slogan is "whatever it takes"; socialists in schools should do whatever it takes to break the hold of the vile set of ideas they represent, and present an alternative based on caring about the development of students as learners and human beings.

Scrapping whole subjects to chase grades!

Bishop Challoner school in east London has ditched Religious Education teaching in Year 11, and is instead running extra English classes in the RE timetable slots.

Apparently the headteacher believes this gives it a better chance to scrape a few more A-C grades (and, in reality, this means C grades) at GCSE.

It's particularly bizarre given that Bishop Challoner is a Roman Catholic school. Were the pupils, parents, or teachers were consulted about this change and given a say? Or did management impose it unilaterally?

The enforced obsession with grades and statistics is damaging to our pupils' education.



Workers' Liberty is a revolutionary socialist organisation active in the British labour movement fighting for an alternative to capitalism and Stalinism based on common ownership, democracy and workers' control. *Class Struggle* is produced by our members, supporters and friends who work in education in Tower Hamlets. To get involved with producing the bulletin, or to take copies for your workplace, email awl@workersliberty.org with the subject line 'Tower Hamlets Class Struggle'.