

# Statement regarding ongoing strike action at St Catherine's Catholic School

6 December 2019



The NEU's dispute has been ongoing since April. The lack of leadership over these months and the inaction of those in positions of responsibility has caused a loss of confidence in the Head Teacher, Chair of Governors and Governing Body and their ability to lead the School to a fair resolution. Our concerns have been growing over the course of the Head Teacher's leadership, with our dispute beginning in April. In July, 34 members of staff submitted statements of concern, in October 55 members of the NEU voted for strike and in November 66 members of staff signed a letter of no confidence in the Head Teacher.

Our dispute began in April when the Head Teacher read sensitive information from a mental health survey. Staff were concerned that they were identifiable and felt vulnerable, due to a culture of fear that existed as a consequence of the Head Teacher's leadership. This culture of fear was created by factors including: claims of bullying by the Head Teacher, lines of communication being closed down and the staff's professional voice being dismissed, all of which had resulted in staff members leaving their jobs. After this sensitive information was read by the Head Teacher, a letter was sent to the Chair of Governors from the NEU on 7 May, raising our concerns.

**The NEU initially asked that there be: a full and fair investigation into how and why the Head Teacher had read sensitive information regarding the mental health of staff; recognition of the breakdown of trust between staff and the Headteacher; and steps taken to repair this.**

A meeting between governors and the NEU was eventually arranged. However, two days before this meeting, on 19 June, one of the Union representatives, who was meant to be present at the meeting, was suspended based on a bogus allegation.

The Union met with the Chair of Governors, Mr Connell, Vice-Chair, Mrs Laponder and another member of the governing body, Mr Laponder on 21 June. The Union were informed that there had been an independent investigation into the breach of sensitive information. The investigation had concluded that there was no issue of concern. The independent investigation had been conducted by Mr Laponder. The Union argue that this investigation was neither full nor fair.

**Our call for a full and fair investigation into how and why the Head Teacher read sensitive information was not met.**

In the 21 June meeting, the governors stated that they were surprised that staff felt a culture of fear was prevalent at St Catherine's, as they frequently walked the corridors and were aware of the staff's working environment. Members of the union do not recognise this description of the governors' activity in school. Indeed, most members would not be able to identify Mrs or Mr Laponder. Mr Connell asked the union reps to provide evidence of the staff's concerns. Mr Connell said that individual staff members who submitted statements would be protected.

**Our call for the Governing Body to recognise the breakdown of trust between staff and the Headteacher and take steps to repair this was not met.**

The same day that the NEU met with governors, 21 June, Mr Connell suspended two further staff members.

On 1 July, in response to Mr Connell's request for evidence of a culture of fear, 34 members of the Union provided such evidence in the form of statements of concern. These were collated and sent to Mr Connell, as a union document. These collated statements were made by a range of staff, from those who had lots of contact with the Head Teacher and typically many concerns about her leadership, to those who had less contact but who still had a story to tell and wanted to share the concerns they had. Some statements were from staff who had left the School. These included allegations of bullying by the Head Teacher.

**At this point the NEU was calling for the statements, requested by Mr Connell, to be investigated properly and professionally.**

The Union never received a reply to its evidence. Instead, Mr Connell wrote letters to individual members of staff, to their home addresses, and therefore broke his promise of protecting individuals. The Union had hoped Mr Connell would investigate the recurring issues arising in the statements, and report back the action he would take to the Union. Mr Connell did not seek to speak to any of the staff who had submitted statements during his investigation and therefore an effective investigation did not take place. The statements made by staff who had left the School, and which contained serious allegations, were not even acknowledged. However, evidence of staff having left due to the Head Teacher's behaviour had been specifically requested by Mr Connell in the 21 June meeting. We note that in Mr Connell's letter to parents of 8 November 2019 regarding the NEU strike action, he stated that "in the three years prior to [1 July 2019], governors have received no complaints about the Headteacher from staff at all". However, a letter from a departing member of staff, claiming bullying by the Head Teacher, sent to Mr Connell and Mrs Laponder on 15 July 2018 and reproduced and included in the pack of 34 statements sent on 1 July 2019, is clear evidence that this assertion is simply untrue. We are deeply concerned that the Chair of Governors misled parents in this way and that, to this day, he has not responded to these serious claims of bullying by the Head Teacher.

**Our call for Mr Connell to investigate the statements properly and professionally was not met.**

In September the suspended Union rep returned to work with no case to answer, as the suspension was based on a bogus allegation. Following the completion of the investigation in July by the HR company, the School dispensed with its services and employed a new HR company. That company then took over the investigation into two other members of staff, who were suspended on 21 June.

On 18 September the Union reps met with the Head Teacher and the School's HR representative in school. At this meeting the Head teacher and HR representative said there would be an investigation into the statements collated by the Union at Mr Connell's request. The HR representative had offered to arrange an independent investigation. The Union agreed to this. A month later, 19 October, the end of the first half term, no investigation had begun. The two members of staff remained suspended and now a third had been dismissed without the School's own disciplinary policy being followed. This only added to the culture of fear for staff.

**At this point the NEU was calling for:**

- **The two suspended members of staff to be returned to work while their investigations took place**
- **The dismissed member of staff to be reinstated, under suspension, and a fair investigation to take place**
- **An independent investigation to take place into the Union's collated statements.**

On 28 October, Union reps engaged in talks at ACAS with the Head Teacher, Mrs Connolly, the Chair of Governors, Mr Connell, and another member of the Governing Body, Mr Fox. These talks were proposed and arranged by the Union. Progress was made during these talks, and it is true that an investigation into the collated statements was agreed, for the third time. The Chair of Governors refused to lift the suspensions while investigations continued. The Union, who had full details of the allegation against their member, did not believe that a suspension was appropriate or necessary. Due to the decision not to lift the suspensions, the Union doubting that the dismissed member of staff would receive a fair investigation, and not being able to trust the promise of a fair investigation into statements (which had previously been promised twice and not completed), the Union did not feel satisfied that the Head Teacher, Chair of Governors and Governing Body were committed to improving working conditions for staff and supporting a fair resolution.

**Our calls for a sensible and fair resolution were, again, not met.**

Reluctantly, we began periodic strike action on 30 October. From then until the time of writing, the Governing Body has refused to meet again at ACAS with the NEU. Three weeks after the meeting at ACAS, the Director of Education of the Archdiocese of Southwark met with the NEU. The meeting took place with the full agreement of the School's Trustees. At this meeting the Union explained that we now felt the Governing Body were unwilling or unable to act to hold the Head Teacher to account for the many and serious concerns that we had been raising since April, and that had only become more serious with the suspension and dismissal of colleagues.

**At this point the NEU called for the Governing Body to be dissolved in order for the Head Teacher to be properly held to account by a new Governing Body, and for the suspended and dismissed members of staff to be afforded fair process.**

Following this, the La Sainte Union Trustees wrote to parents on 22 November to inform parents that they would meet the following week with the hope of reaching a resolution to the dispute. Staff and parents have had no communication from them since 22 November.

**Our calls for the Governing Body to be dissolved were not met.**

The continuous lack of desire from the Head Teacher and Governing Body to resolve the dispute swiftly and effectively pushed the NEU to periodic strike action. There is nothing our members would like more than a fair resolution of our concerns and for strike action to end. The failure of the Chair of Governors and Governing Body to hold the Head Teacher to account, compounded by Mr Connell's 8 November letter to parents that, we believe, demonstrated he is not impartial in his treatment of staff concerns and complaints, appears to show that they are unwilling or unable to resolve this dispute. Mrs Connolly's treatment of staff, and her behaviour over many months, should, under any fair system of governance, have led by now to her suspension and dismissal. The fact that this has not happened leads us to call unequivocally for her and the Governing Body to step down or be removed from post. The inaction of the Governing Body has now, regrettably, pushed the NEU to vote in favour of further strike action in January.

**We now call for the Trustees to dissolve the Governing Body and remove the Head Teacher from post (at least until the outcome of an independent investigation) and replace them with new governors who will negotiate with us in good faith and as a matter of urgency.**