

## Solidarity in a climate of fear

In the aftermath of a recent religious scandal involving a schoolteacher, **Claire Fox** salutes the binmen who, she believes, have shown up how a climate of fear can make cowards of leaders – and threaten our democratic core values



Three cheers for the binmen. And not just because they have continued to work throughout the pandemic, however risky their work, and rarely get mentioned in the eulogies doled out to frontline workers.

In a recent high-profile incident, a group of binmen showed courageous leadership in going where mainstream politicians and trade-unionists have literally feared to tread. Bury Unite commercial branch in the North West, which represents binmen across the borough, passed a motion standing up for a Batley grammar school teacher who was suspended, forced into hiding and shamefully abandoned by teaching unions, for using a cartoon of the Prophet Muhammad in a lesson on religious tolerance.

An independent investigation into the incident has concluded staff involved in the lesson did not intend to cause offence with the image and the suspended teacher can now return to the classroom. Everyone should be ashamed to live in a society in which a schoolteacher (and his family) has been forced into hiding for fear of his life, simply for doing his job. This fear is surely not unfounded in the context of the brutal beheading of French teacher Samuel Paty last year for showing cartoons of Muhammad to his pupils. The Batley teacher's similar 'offence' led to angry protests erupting outside his North Kirklees school. Bad enough, but it's the official response to those protests that is most troubling.

Surely those protestors should not be able to effect a hecklers' veto. They couldn't if democrats, councillors, local government education departments, unions and MPs were incensed enough to metaphorically shout louder. Sadly, we've seen the opposite

response, with dire consequences for local democracy and free speech.

In recent local elections, the Labour MP for Batley and Spen, Tracy Brabin, was elected as the first metro mayor of West Yorkshire, triggering a by-election. I hope she uses her new position to redress her egregious initial remarks about the grammar school incident, in which she effectively endorsed the protestors' concerns, saying she was 'pleased that the school has recognised it was inappropriate and apologised'.

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However, Ms Brabin might note that we might as well dispense with elections if all it takes to influence education policy is to organise a rowdy angry protest at the school gates. Similarly, blasphemy laws were abolished over a decade ago, but such legislative changes become irrelevant if curricula can be dictated according to religious sensitivities.

The binmen's magnificent solidarity stands out because of its novelty. Too many have stood by mutely. It is particularly galling that teaching unions, keen to parrot the 'silence is violence' slogan of Black Lives Matters last year and having spent the whole of the pandemic demanding schools were closed to protect their members' safety, have become silent when one of their members' safety is physically threatened.

The binmen's motion, which has been submitted as an emergency motion for the National Conference of Trade Union

Councils this month, picks up on this general reticence from the trade union movement. It urges the National Education Union (NEU) and all other unions to support the teacher and publicly condemn those who demanded his dismissal. Branch secretary Brian Bamford, also secretary of Tameside Trade Union Council, claims that an NEU official attempted to pressurise him into withdrawing the motion as it was 'unhelpful'.

The NEU's explanation is telling. They claim further attention for the teacher's plight 'risks inflaming what is an extremely sensitive and very complex situation'. This echoes Mayor Brabin's warning against 'fanning the flames', which she claims would 'provoke hate and division'. There is an inference that making a fuss will fuel Islamophobia, but when protesters claim to speak 'on behalf of the Muslim community', we should not take that at face value. How insulting to the vast majority of Muslims to lump them in with intolerant fundamentalists. This allows self-appointed community leaders to assume a position of moral authority without challenge, just in case anyone thinks disagreeing with their demands might be seen as prejudice.

This spineless official diktat to keep schtum creates an Omertá around a scandal that threatens democratic core values. In the forthcoming by-election, I hope all candidates will take inspiration from local binmen and make this issue central to their campaign to be MP for the area. And local councils should organise a doorstep clap to celebrate the binmen's frontline bravery. ■

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## soapbox



By Paul Wheeler

One of the few advantages of the COVID crisis was the opportunity to catch up on a few of the classics. *Metropolis* by Fritz Lang describes a dystopian future where the rich elite are isolated from the hard working drones who labour for little.

'Working from home' now seems to be one of the most widespread consequences of the pandemic for huge numbers of professional workers. While presenting challenges it has removed for many the daily grind of the commute and saved hours of down time. However, in local government there is a clear divide between those able to take advantage from 'WFH' and those who could not. Most of those we have clapped for the last 18 months were part of a firm frontline who could not isolate themselves: care workers, refuse collectors, street cleaners and social workers were among the thousands who had no choice but to continue working in the streets and offices of our towns.

As the threat of COVID begins to lift there are some difficult questions for local councils and wider society. The property pages of the quality press have begun to indicate WFH has massively expanded the residential options for many professional and technical occupations. No need to leave rural idylls to provide services to town and cities across the land. For some work would be combined with time on even sunnier climes.

The attraction is evident but there are huge implications for our towns and cities in terms of local spending power and the connections with community interests and concerns. If most of the senior managers and professionals barely visit the area in which they work how can they properly plan for its future? It is apparent that many city centres have yet to recover the foot fall and spend from pre-COVID days. How much more difficult will that recovery be if a significant number of well-paid workers never spend time or money there?

Perhaps one of the issues for the forthcoming Local Government Association conference could be how local councils can set an example to the wider world of work and ensure that we have inclusive communities both at work and home.

After all, *Metropolis* didn't have a happy ending. ■

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