

Academics critical of war face harassment in US

Shannon Jones
22 October 2001

Free speech is under attack on university campuses across the United States, with those critical of US policies facing mounting harassment and threats.

In many cases university officials are caving in to pressure to discipline or censure faculty and staff that engage in protests against US militarism or express opposition to the patriotic hysteria whipped up by the media and government officials since the September 11 terrorist attacks. Professors have faced threats and calls for dismissal for expressing even mildly oppositional views or engaging in “inappropriate speech.” In the majority of cases those victimized have been left-wing critics of US foreign policy.

City College of New York faculty and students who attended an October 2 teach-in sponsored by the Professional Staff Congress were denounced by the media and the City University of New York (CUNY) Board of Trustees. The event, “Threats of War, Challenges of Peace,” sponsored by the campus professors union, was open to all points of view, including support for US military intervention in Afghanistan. During the course of the teach-in a number of participants attempted to explain the historical context underlying the resort to terrorism by Islamic fundamentalists.

An October 4 op-ed piece in the *New York Post*, titled, “CUNY vows crackdown on Anti-US hatefest,” called the event “a hard core America-bashing festival.” It quoted CUNY trustee Jeffrey Wiesenfeld who declared, “They’re fortunate it’s not up to me. I would consider that behavior seditious at this time.”

CUNY Chancellor Matthew Goldstein denounced the teach-in and announced his intention to convene a special meeting of the board of trustees to consider resolutions condemning the event.

At Brooklyn College, the school administration

blocked a scheduled public meeting on campus opposing the war in Afghanistan organized by the Third World Within-Peace Action Coalition. Campus officials imposed additional fees and demanded identification checks of all attendees. Further, the school issued a warning about holding campus activities that challenged the so-called consensus in the US supporting the war against Afghanistan. As a consequence organizers were forced to move the event to an off-campus location.

The University of South Florida placed Professor Sami Al-Arian on indefinite leave after he appeared on a TV news program where he discussed his previous association with several academics now labeled suspected terrorists by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Following the TV appearance the university received angry phone calls, including death threats. The university claimed the suspension was to protect Al-Arian.

A library assistant at the University of California at Los Angeles received a five-day suspension without pay after he sent out an e-mail criticizing US support for Israel and the ongoing bombing of Iraq. He was responding to a patriotic mass e-mailing by a coworker. In issuing the suspension the school cited a policy banning the sending of unsolicited electronic communications and a new policy against the sending of political, religious or patriotic messages. The suspended staff member, a 22-year employee of the university, said he was unaware of the policies and noted that he was the only person disciplined in the incident.

A professor at the University of New Mexico was forced to leave campus for one week after he made an off-the-cuff joke in class about the attack on the Pentagon the day of the terrorist hijackings. Several

state legislators called for the academic to be fired. University officials said they were conducting an internal investigation of the incident.

The school's provost defended the administration's actions against the professor. "Our position is that faculty members have certain responsibilities to their students. It's not a free speech issue, it's a professional issue," he claimed.

The Foundation for Individual Freedom, a Philadelphia-based organization that provides legal help to faculty members who feel their rights have been abused, said academic freedom of expression has been eroded since September 11. The group is currently providing assistance to 10 professors who say they have been victimized because of their views.

The fact that the attempt to silence academic free speech enjoys support at the highest levels of government was indicated by the reaction to remarks made by one New York City school official, Judith Rizzo, deputy chancellor, who said the terrorist attacks demonstrated the importance of teaching about Muslim culture. She was denounced by Lynne Cheney, wife of US Vice President Dick Cheney, who claimed the statement implied the events of September 11 were the fault of the United States.

A number of media reports have noted the attacks on academic free speech but have downplayed the incidents, suggesting they are an understandable overreaction. They have pointed out that there have also been attempts by school officials to censor views deemed excessively chauvinist or racist.

As history has shown, all suppression of democratic rights, no matter against whom it is initially directed, inevitably rebounds hardest against the most progressive elements in society. By seeking to crack down on views deemed outside the mainstream within the educational establishment, the ruling elite and its academic lackeys are seeking to stifle all critical thought. Such policies pose a grave threat not just to academics, but to the democratic rights of the entire working population.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact