

Detroit architects group expels member for political beliefs

Our reporter
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The board of a group of architects which was formed to encourage new ideas and an open exchange of opinions has expelled a leading member for voicing his. The group known as FLAK was organized last year in Detroit, a city which has come to epitomize urban decay, in order to promote alternatives to the corporate-controlled development which dominates the city. In their mission statement, the members declare, “We defend intellectual freedom, oppose all forms of censorship, and offer sanctuary to all creative individuals.”

Several weeks after a controversial symposium, which was organized in November in conjunction with FLAK’s first public exhibition, the board expelled its secretary, Tim Nichols.

The exhibition, titled “Critical Mass,” had opened at the Museum of New Art (MONA) in Detroit on November 9. It included the work of a wide array of architects and artists and enjoyed a large audience and a warm response. As one of the curators for the show, Nichols had included the work of the two Israeli architects, Eyal Weizman and Rafi Segal, who had been censored and victimized for exposing the role of planning and architectural design on the West Bank. Their work, entitled “A Civilian Occupation,” which is now on view at the Storefront for Architecture in New York City, documents the complex ways in which Israeli architecture has become a strategic weapon for violating the human rights of the Palestinians.

For the symposium held at MONA on November 17, Nichols nominated both Weizman to join the panel and David Walsh, the arts editor of the *World Socialist Web Site*, to be the moderator. The panel included Jason Young, an assistant professor at the University of Michigan; Julie Kim, a local architect and instructor at the University of Detroit; Lowell Boileau, formerly a

member of the UAW and currently editor of a web site about Detroit; and George Tysh, an editor at the weekly *Metro Times*.

During the discussion period, Nichols criticized the city’s Democratic Party administration for supervising the decay of neighborhoods and the destruction of city services while at the same time offering hundreds of millions of dollars in tax abatements and other subsidies to the largest industrial corporations in the world. He joined Walsh in advocating an anti-capitalist point of view as an essential perspective for rebuilding Detroit.

The opinions of Weizman, Walsh and Nichols appear to have angered some members of the group. One, Steve Rost, a professor at Lawrence Technological University (LTU), approached Nichols when the discussion ended and said sarcastically, “Congratulations, Tim. You succeeded in imposing your agenda on the symposium.”

Members of the FLAK board began immediately to conspire with the group’s president, Rochelle Martin, who is also a professor at LTU, for Nichols’ expulsion. They prepared a meeting of the board on December 12 for the sole purpose of witch-hunting and expelling the group’s secretary. Nichols arrived to take the minutes of the meeting but seemed to be the only person in attendance, who was unaware of the meeting’s real purpose. Martin had prepared his expulsion behind his back. The vote, which was illegal under the group’s bylaws, was 9-2.

On January 7, Nichols wrote a letter appealing the board’s action. He explained that it “violated both the spirit and letter of the mission statement and bylaws of FLAK.” He wrote, “FLAK was established as a democratic membership organization in which the members elect the board and; therefore, only the

members can remove someone from the board.” Martin acknowledged receiving the appeal but has made no reply.

At the end of January, the FLAK vice president, Bryan Koehn, admitted that a group within the board of directors began to prepare Nichols’ expulsion immediately following the symposium. In an email on January 28, Koehn wrote, “Rochelle called me with the information of the numerous individuals who were going to resign from flak if you were not removed.”

When faced with the alternative of defending the principle of free speech, or preparing a political expulsion that violated the principles as well as the bylaws of their organization, Martin and Koehn chose the latter course of action.

While differences of opinion can be sharp—and they were in this case—they do not justify the suppression of democratic rights. Nor do they suspend the responsibility of a body, such as FLAK’s board, to uphold its bylaws. In the present atmosphere of government repression and the suppression of democratic rights, the defense of intellectual freedom is a vital principle which must be defended.

We call on architects, artists and young people to oppose this act of political victimization. Write to the FLAK board, care of Rochelle Martin, 29601 Gilchrist, Farmington Hills, Michigan 48334, marshall_mar@msn.com, to demand that it rescind Nichols’ expulsion and respect the democratic rights of all of its members. Please, send a copy to: editor@wsws.org.



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