

Right-wing campaign targets Colorado teacher for anti-Bush remarks

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A Colorado high school teacher is under attack for anti-Bush and anti-capitalist statements he made during a class last month. Jay Bennish, a 28-year-old teacher at Overland High School, near Denver, has been suspended by his school pending an investigation into the remarks.

Bennish has received substantial support from students, including hundreds who walked out of class on March 2 to protest the decision by the school. The *Rocky Mountain News* quoted one student, Stacy Caruso, a 17-year-old junior, who said, “We want to know what’s going on in the world.” She said that in Bennish’s classes, the students learned things they were not taught elsewhere, such as the use of sweatshop labor in China and the imprisonment of Japanese-Americans during World War II.

Bennish, who has taught at Overland since 2000, was recorded by Sean Allen, a student, on February 1, during a discussion of the significance of President Bush’s State of the Union address. In the recording, Bennish is heard denouncing American foreign policy and suggesting that certain comments made by Bush echoed those of Adolf Hitler. The tape was subsequently distributed to local and national right-wing talk show hosts and media commentators, who organized a campaign to get Bennish fired.

Bennish was suspended March 1 by the school administration, pending the results of an investigation into whether his remarks violated regulations requiring a balanced perspective in the classroom. A final decision from the school is expected March 8.

In his comments, which were interspersed with remarks and questions from students, Bennish criticized American military actions. He called the invasion of Iraq “illegal” and argued that the official rationale for the war conflicted with reality.

“There are dozens of countries with weapons of mass destruction,” he noted, and “plenty of countries that are controlled by dictators”; however, these countries were not invaded. He called the US “the most violent state in the world.”

Speaking of Bush’s statements to the effect that the US had the right to invade any country, Bennish said, “Bush and Hitler are not the same, but there are eerie similarities to the tone they use.”

Bennish further suggested to his class that to understand the world, it was necessary to understand the operations of the capitalist system, in which the “means of production are owned privately and operated...for the purpose of producing profit.” This is an “economic system at odds with humanity,” he said, “at odds with caring and compassion, at odds with human rights.”

He concluded his comments, which on the recording last about 20 minutes, by saying to his class, “I’m not in any way implying that you should agree with me.... But what I am trying to get you to do is think more in depth, and not just to take things from the surface.”

He called questions by one of the students who criticized his remarks, apparently the student who made the recording, “good and legitimate questions.” He has since said that later in the class, during a portion not recorded by the student, he offered students extra credit for challenging the views he expressed.

The decision by the school to suspend Bennish is a cowardly capitulation to a right-wing campaign against political dissent in the classroom, at both high schools and universities. There can be no doubt that if Bennish had defended the war in Iraq as necessary to defeat terrorism, or had praised Bush’s State of the Union speech, the school would not contemplate suspending him for failing to present a balanced perspective. What

has provoked such outrage among right-wing circles is not that Bennish presented a definite viewpoint to his class, but that this viewpoint challenges the official lies used to justify the policies of the American ruling elite and questions the legitimacy of the profit system.

David Lane, attorney for Bennish, said at a press conference on Friday, “I think it would be an absolute tragedy to discipline him for this. It sends a message to public school teachers everywhere that if you dare say something negative about the president of the United States or the policies of the United States, you’re going to be disciplined by your district.” That, Lane said, “makes us a repressive society.”

Lane has also represented Ward Churchill, the University of Colorado professor who came under attack in 2005 for statements he made that those killed in the September 11 attacks were “little Eichmanns” and that the terrorist actions were a response to US military policy.

The campaign against Bennish shares many similarities to other cases in which professors or teachers have been attacked for expressing oppositional views, particularly in the way the attack on Bennish has been orchestrated by the right-wing media to press for greater censorship in schools. The reason why Sean Allen decided to record the class remains unclear. However, Allen’s father immediately sought to distribute the tape to talk shows and press commentators, including Walter Williams, a syndicated columnist who is published in right-wing newspapers such as the *Washington Times*.

Williams responded eagerly, writing a column on February 22 entitled “Youth Indoctrination,” in which he denounced Bennish, saying that his comments were not appropriate “for any classroom session.” Williams drew broader conclusions: “This kind of indoctrination is by no means restricted to Overland High School. Schoolteachers, at all grades, often use classrooms for environmental, antiwar, anti-capitalist and anti-parent propaganda.” Steps must be taken, he suggested, to prevent these oppositional perspectives from being presented in the classroom.

The issue was subsequently reported by various blogs and radio shows. Then, on March 1, the tape was played by local Denver talk show host Mike Rosen, who is also a columnist for the *Rocky Mountain News*. Rosen often writes columns denouncing the “liberal

media.”

After the decision by the school to suspend Bennish, the story was picked up by the national news media, and Sean Allen was featured on Fox’s “Hannity & Colmes” show. Sean Hannity used the opportunity to declare, “Now every left-wing teacher knows that there might be a Sean in their class that might be recording their statements.” He said that Allen “may have done more for the educational system than anybody has done in years.”

Vince Carroll, editorial page editor of the *Rocky Mountain News*, wrote on March 3 that “balance is a plastic grail if the initial thesis is far on the fringe,” and added that the views Bennish expressed were akin to Holocaust denial. Teachers should not be allowed to present them even as legitimate opinions, he argued.

Once the issue was broadcast by the right-wing media, Bennish became the target of hate mail, including death threats.

The attack on Bennish received the imprimatur of Colorado Governor Bill Owens on March 6. On Rosen’s talk show, Owens praised Allen for taping the lecture and denounced those, including many students, who have criticized Allen. Bennish will have to “defend himself to the people that pay his salary,” Owens said.

In August 2004, a similar campaign was unleashed against Steven Helmericks, a professor at Colorado State University, for comments he made in class opposing the war in Iraq. Helmericks was eventually pressured to leave the university.

Several organizations nationally have been organized to pursue a McCarthyite witch-hunt by “outing” leftist professors. These include CampusWatch, run by Daniel Pipes, which targets professors critical of Israeli and American foreign policy, and a recently formed group at the University of California Los Angeles, the Bruin Alumni Association, which has paid students to hand over course materials, lecture notes and recordings of individuals on their list of “radical professors.”



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