

An exchange with New York Post reporter on witch-hunt of school principal

Bill Van Auken
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Chuck Bennett, a reporter who wrote a series of articles for the *New York Post* that furthered a smear campaign against Debbie Almontaser, the principal of the Khalil Gibran Academy, a new New York City public school offering courses in Arabic and Arab culture, has written to the *World Socialist Web Site* complaining that we misrepresented his journalistic efforts by accusing him of “ambush” journalism. (See “New York City: Right-wing Zionist witch-hunt ousts principal of new Arabic school”)

Bennett penned an article headlined “City Principal is ‘Revolting,’” which centered not on the school or its curriculum, but on an utterly spurious attempt to tie Almontaser to a T-shirt produced by a group providing video production training to young Arab-American women. This group happened to have been granted office space in a building run by a Yemeni-American cultural organization where Almontaser is a board member.

The T-shirt bore the logo “Intifada NYC.” The principal’s attempt to provide a reasoned answer to Bennett’s insistence that she explain the meaning of the word “Intifada” was then used by the *Post* to launch a ferocious witch-hunt, referring to her as the “Intifada Principal.”

The campaign by the *Post* proved crucial in whipping up a right-wing furor—joined by various Democratic officials and United Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten—against the school and Almontaser, forcing her to resign.

What follows is Bennett’s complaint and a reply by Bill Van Auken of the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Your account of my interview with Almontaser is wrong. In no way whatsoever was she “ambushed.” It seems you are lifting material from an incorrect article in *The Jewish Week*.

My interview with Almontaser was conducted in the presence of a press secretary from the Dept. of Education. Please contact her. She will confirm that from the beginning Almontaser was aware that the focus of the interview was about the Intifada T-shirts. In fact, it was the first question. I’d appreciate a corrected version be included online.

Thank you.

Chuck Bennett

NY Post

Dear Mr. Bennett:

The *World Socialist Web Site* would have had no problem making a factual correction to its September 1 story, “New York City: Right-wing Zionist witch-hunt ousts principal of new Arabic school,” by Steve Light, had your version of the interview with Principal Almontaser been confirmed by the Department of Education press secretary. Though, it must be added, whether your question about T-shirts came first or last hardly would have affected our political assessment of the foul and reactionary ambush journalism practiced by the *New York Post* and you, in particular, in this episode.

In fact, the press secretary failed to corroborate your version of the encounter with Almontaser, saying only, “I do not want to speak about this issue on the record/... Don’t make any assumptions about this.” Given this response, we see no reason to alter our story.

We have also spoken in the meantime to people familiar with Principal Almontaser’s account of the interview, who report that she repeatedly protested your questioning her about the T-shirt as inappropriate, something that finds no reflection in your article in the *Post*.

Your complaint seems to suggest that you have somehow been misrepresented by the WSWS or that your journalistic integrity has been called into question unjustly.

To this, I can only say: Come off it, Mr. Bennett. After all, you do write for the *New York Post*. Your article was entirely in keeping with the sleazy journalistic standards and reactionary politics of your boss, Rupert Murdoch. No doubt your piece on Principal Almontaser and the Khalil Gibran Academy made the “dirty digger” proud.

Your article generally falls under the category of a right-wing hit job. Its inspiration came from the protracted campaign waged by a group of Republican and Zionist ideologues who have seized upon the school to promote their virulently anti-Arab and anti-Islamic agenda.

This group includes Daniel Pipes, a political columnist for

the *Post*, who is listed as a member of the national advisory board of Stop the Madrassa, the front group that organized the smear campaign against the school. Pipes is best known for organizing McCarthyite-style witch-hunts against American academics who dare to question US support for Israel. Also on the board is Frank Gaffney, the right-wing columnist and former Pentagon official who is one of the most prominent advocates of war with Iran.

The involvement of these elements has nothing to do with educational concerns. Their sole interest was to distort the aims of the new school—which were the same as dozens of other New York City public schools teaching courses in languages ranging from Russian to Chinese, Spanish and Creole—in order to turn it into a grotesque caricature, an Islamist “madrassa” that supposedly posed some kind of terrorist threat.

That’s where you and the *Post* came in, turning the poisoned political invective of Stop the Madrassa into a lurid—and utterly irrelevant—story about “terrorist” T-shirts being worn by young women learning how to make videos.

Without ever talking to the group that produced the T-shirts, you determined that they represented a “glorification of Palestinian violence” and a “call for a Gaza-style uprising in the Big Apple.” Then, of course, you demanded that Principal Almontaser take responsibility for them.

It is a measure of the putrid and right-wing atmosphere dominating America’s political and educational establishments—an atmosphere that Murdoch’s *Post* and Fox News have played no small part in generating—that Almontaser’s failure to issue a categorical denunciation of the T-shirts could be used to force her out of her job.

In point of fact, the group that produced the shirts, Arab Women Active in Art and Media, explained that its use of the word was in keeping with the literal Arabic meaning of “shaking off,” which it said referred to the “shaking off” of discrimination and prejudice and an embracing of our roles as producers rather than simply objects of the mass media and public discourse.” Needless to say, this explanation never found its way into any of your articles.

And if it had referred to the Palestinian Intifada, what of it? Millions of Palestinians and people all over the world are justifiably proud of the Palestinian youth with slingshots who confronted Israeli tanks in the fight against an illegal occupation and the conditions of poverty and oppression that it has imposed.

The openly racist agitation by the *Post* against Almontaser was pursued by its columnists, while you handled the supposedly “straight news” angle. Thus, one had the always ineffable Andrea Peyser referring to Almontaser as “the hijab-wearing principal of a taxpayer-funded school” and accusing her of having “issued a fatwa against the kids of

New York.”

The “news” stories were nothing more than a setup for this kind of vicious character assassination. And they were anything but apolitical. The fact that they were largely crafted by the right-wing Zionist elements behind the Stop the Madrassa front group is evident.

Interestingly, you gave the last quoted comment in your August 6 story to one Pamela Hall, whom you describe as “a Manhattan mom opposed to the academy on the grounds that it violates separation of church and state.” She is reported to have commented, “Intifada is a war. Isn’t that what Arafat had?”

You didn’t bother to inform the *Post*’s readers that this “mom” is a right-wing activist, not only a member of Stop the Madrassa, but also the New York head of an anti-Islamic and anti-immigrant outfit known as United America Committee, which is allied with the Minutemen and has gained a certain notoriety for provocative stunts like hanging Osama bin Laden in effigy outside mosques and staging a counter-protest against New York’s annual Muslim-American Day parade.

Such telltale details expose the articles as hack-jobs done in direct partnership with the radical pro-Zionist right.

So, frankly Mr. Bennett, we are not interested in your protest that you were misrepresented by the *World Socialist Web Site*. Misrepresentation, slander and witch-hunting are clearly both the *Post*’s and your own stock-in-trade. If you want to change that, try doing it in the pages of Murdoch’s newspaper.

We, for our part, will continue to do our best to expose and denounce the lies pouring out of the media sewer that employs you.

Bill Van Auken



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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