

Portland teachers protest principal's removal of Occupy speakers

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27 December 2011

In the first week of December, a Portland Occupy education group invited by a sixth-grade teacher to speak to his class was ordered by a school official to leave shortly after their presentation had ended and discussion with the students had begun. A petition circulated to protest their removal and defend academic freedom has garnered wide support.

The decision to evict four representatives of Occupy Portland's educational arm on December 7 was made by Astor School principal Karl Newsome and subsequently affirmed by a Portland Public Schools (PPS) representative. According to the *Oregonian*, "Matt Shelby, spokesman for Portland Public Schools, said teachers have discretion, but that notification was expected with controversial speakers. 'Occupy Portland is obviously controversial,' Shelby said."

According to the Facebook page of one of the members of Occupy Portland Panel, Hil Boyd, ten minutes into the dialogue with the students, "an administrator delivered a message to the teachers..." and one of the teachers "...notified the group that the Portland School District was not comfortable with the conversation and to end the discussion."

The removal of Occupy representatives from a Portland public school occurred three weeks after hundreds of police, directed by Democratic Mayor Sam Adams, massed downtown to evict Occupy Portland from the two parks where their camp sites had been established on October 6. This was part of a nationwide wave of evictions of Occupy protesters from their camps. Many of the evictions were carried out in cities headed by Democratic Party mayors.

Denying the existence of a coordinated effort by mayors of these cities to shut down the protests, a spokesperson for Mayor Adams' office told *The Atlantic Wire*, "The mayors talked about how difficult it is to communicate with the leaderless movement," adding, "It was not a strategy session" and "not a coordinating session." The spokesperson said that the mayor's staffer referred to the meeting as "group therapy."

The Portland school board faced heavy criticism last spring for its plan to eliminate 70 teaching positions, cut back funding for Outdoor School, an environmental program, and to fund the school system at \$440 million, the same amount as last year. The board passed the budget with one opposed, who proposed instead that teachers pay and benefits should be frozen in order to avoid deeper cuts to programs.

The amount of periods in a day was increased from seven to eight, and the amount of classes teachers must instruct went up from five to six per day, without any increase in compensation.

Recently released census data show PPS, the largest school district in the state, now has the highest poverty level since 2005, at 18 percent, or one out of every five students. Neighboring school districts Reynolds and David Douglas have roughly one out of every three students in poverty.

It is under these conditions that Wilson High School social studies teacher Hyung Nam, with other teachers, initiated a petition to oppose the anti-democratic action of PPS to silence discussion of economic and social inequality.

The petition states, “We reject the idea that teachers would need to notify parents or obtain principal approval before bringing Occupy speakers to their classrooms. This is a violation of the professional discretion and academic freedom of teachers.”

Speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site*, Nam said that the petition is bound up with efforts to impose a single curriculum that prevents teachers from raising broader issues. “They have us just deliver the standardized material rather than teach. Teachers are no longer allowed to create our own syllabi; we are provided a template. It is not just about the Occupy thing, but all these developments facing teachers,” he said.

“Full time teachers are teaching an extra class,” Nam added. “We were promised that the classes would be smaller, instead they are much larger. With an eight period schedule we lose two weeks of instruction time. We have to cut from our curriculum.”

PPS has had a history of allowing speakers from military, business and, as well, pro-capitalist politicians, to address classrooms without the need for notification or permission from parents. Eric Swehla, an elementary school teacher and a petition signer said, “I have invited many people to speak to my class and never had to get a principal’s permission.”

Nam commented in an email to Chief Academic Officer Carla Randall that, “Meanwhile, I’m sure no one would be asked to get permission to have a presidential candidate, like Newt Gingrich, visit a class or school. But he and many others, [who] administrators may not consider controversial, are highly controversial, when he wants to get rid of child labor laws, have poor kids work as janitors in schools, fire unionized staff, etc.”

Nam told the WSWS, “Our contract does say we have the right to invite speakers to our classrooms. They have not responded to our question: has there ever been a group required to notify? Education has been an institution for democracy. That is why many of us are teachers, to make education an emancipatory

institution.”

The criterion of “controversial” was applied by PPS simply in order to bar access to representatives of the Occupy movement, a movement that the state has sought to suppress. Police harassment, evictions, assaults and mass arrests, carried out in complete violation of democratic rights, have been used against protestors nationwide against the emergence of mass opposition to social inequality.



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