

New York City de Blasio administration upholds firing of teacher for class on Central Park Five

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Earlier this month, New York City's Law Department filed papers in a suit by fired teacher Jeena Lee-Walker that defends the decision by school administrators to fire her for teaching a November 2013 section in a class at the High School for Arts, Imagination and Inquiry on Manhattan's Upper West Side about the frame-up of the Central Park Five in 1989.

The Law Department, an arm of the administration of so-called progressive Democrat Bill de Blasio, argues that school-sponsored speech "can be regulated where there is a legitimate pedagogical concern... that her presentation in its current incantation could upset the students and potentially lead to physical unrest."

These remarks not only seek to limit the rights of teachers and students in the classroom, but also exhibit the fear of unrest by working-class youth that plagues the city's establishment.

School administrators wanted to stop or change the lesson, as they told Lee-Walker, because they feared it would "rile up" students and could create small "riots." Although she softened her presentation, Lee-Walker maintained her right to conduct a curriculum around the case. The English teacher described her students' reaction to the 2012 documentary, "The Central Park Five" by Emmy-Award winning filmmaker Ken Burns, as "engaged" and "moved."

Her supervisors urged her to use what they falsely called a "balanced" lesson. Lee-Walker told the *Daily News*, "These boys [the Central Park Five] went to jail and lost 14, 18 years of their lives. How can you say that in a more balanced way? Students in general, and black students in particular, should be riled up." School administrators reacted with accusations of

insubordination and eighteen months of poor performance evaluations that resulted in the firing of Lee-Walker.

The frame-up of the Central Park Five began in April 1989 when a woman jogger, a Wall Street bank executive, was brutally raped in Central Park and left in a coma that lasted twelve days and left her with permanent disabilities. Five teens were named by other youth who had been rounded up by police in Central Park. Police extracted confessions from them with lies and intimidation, while denying the youth access to their parents or lawyers. The stories of the accused contradicted each other and they retracted their statements within weeks.

The bourgeois press whipped up a racist law-and-order hysteria against "wilding" youth, characterizing them as a "wolf pack," while then-Mayor Koch called them "monsters." The current presumptive Republican presidential nominee, Donald Trump, bought full-page advertisements in four New York newspapers calling the youth "crazed misfits" and demanding restoration of the death penalty. Trump, it is worth recalling, stated, "I want to hate these muggers and murderers. They should be forced to suffer... Criminals must be told that their civil liberties end when an attack on our safety begins!"

After imprisonments that lasted between six and thirteen years, the convictions of the Central Park Five were vacated in 2002, after a serial rapist serving a life sentence for other crimes confessed to the Central Park attack. DNA that proved to be his alone, as well as other evidence, confirmed his story. Three of the exonerated five sued the City in 2003 for malicious prosecution, racial discrimination, and emotional

distress. After delays lasting a decade, the Administration of Mayor de Blasio settled the case in 2014 for a total of \$41million, while refusing to admit any wrongdoing on the part of the authorities.

The suit by Lee-Walker seeks to uphold her constitutional right to free speech. She is being attacked by the state for seeking to highlight the abuses of an American and New York City law enforcement system that imprisons and murders working class youth at a staggering rate.

Members of the Central Park Five have defended Lee-Walker. Raymond Santana, who was wrongly imprisoned for thirteen years from the age of fourteen, told the *Daily News*, “We’re with her 100% to fight this injustice.” Yusef Salaam, who spent seven years in jail, said that the claims the lessons could incite a riot “takes us back to 1989, where the media put these labels on us—that we were animals. A person working in the school system shouldn’t view our kids like that.”

With big business and government officials already anxious over the growth of popular hatred over stop-and-frisk policing and the murders by police in such cases as that of unarmed Ramarley Graham, Eric Garner and Michael Brown, Lee-Walker is being used as a test case for police-state policies aimed at suppressing all criticism of the ruling elite and its crimes. Faced with the radicalization of growing sections of workers and youth, the political elite is seeking to divide the working class along racial lines and pave the way for open dictatorship.



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