

New York City officials red-bait public school faculty

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In a chilling resurgence of the tactics used decades ago to purge the New York City public school system of faculty deemed insufficiently pro-American, a school principal and two teachers at a Brooklyn high school are under investigation for alleged “communist activity.” The principal of Park Slope Collegiate (PSC), Jill Bloomberg, along with two teachers from the high school are targets of the probe.

The investigation comes in the context of outspoken opposition by faculty, students and parents at PSC to the unequal education afforded to the largely working class, minority student body enrolled at the school. While PSC is situated in one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in Brooklyn—Park Slope—its students are overwhelmingly drawn from poorer areas of the borough.

Opposition at PSC to school inequality flared following the 2011 decision by billionaire mayor Michael Bloomberg’s administration to “co-locate” an additional, highly selective school—Millennium Brooklyn—on the Park Slope campus rather than dedicate resources to improving the existing three schools already on site. The Bloomberg administration carried out this move over the heated objections and protests by many in the PSC community.

Tensions recently spiked again over current mayor Bill de Blasio’s school security procedures, in which working class youth are treated more like criminals than students. Protestors demanded the removal of video cameras and metal detectors, and an end to the brutal treatment of students by police and school security guards. There have been several recent incidents involving NYPD and school security, including one in 2015 where a school security officer handcuffed a student who used a pin to hold together his broken eyeglasses. The officer claimed the pin

could be used as a weapon.

The school’s principal, Jill Bloomberg, repeatedly convened school events and took other action opposed to the unequal treatment of her students, primarily emphasizing the racial aspects. Most recently she fired off angry complaints about the allocation of sports programs on the campus, charging the Department of Education with racial discrimination.

Millennium Brooklyn shares a sports program with its sister Millennium school in Manhattan. Together they are afforded 17 different sports teams by the Department of Education. PSC meanwhile shares its athletic program with the two remaining schools on the Park Slope campus. They are allocated just nine teams, despite a combined enrollment 50 percent higher than the two Millennium schools. Jill Bloomberg latched on to the relatively modest differences in racial composition between the elite Millennium Brooklyn (31 percent white) and the working-class PSC (10 percent white) to explain the inequality in racial terms.

Bloomberg, in a complaint filed with a Federal court in New York, charged that the city’s investigation is political retribution for her advocacy and organizing against unequal resource allocation, particularly in response to her complaints about the sports programs.

The city, which initially refused to disclose the nature of the investigation against Bloomberg, filed papers in court asserting it was a fresh complaint from a confidential source, rather than the principal’s opposition to the unequal sports funding, which triggered the investigation. The allegations, denied by Bloomberg, accuse her of belonging to and actively recruiting students to participate in the Progressive Labor Party (PL), a Maoist offshoot of the Communist Party. They also allege her husband filmed a documentary for the Len Ragozin Foundation, screened

it at PSC and charged admission. The Len Ragozin Foundation, they assert, is associated with PL.

Last week a judge denied Bloomberg's request for an immediate injunction, allowing the investigation to proceed, at least for now.

Nonetheless the case shed light on the witch hunt atmosphere spread by the investigation. PSC's assistant principal Carla Laban was interviewed by New York City Department of Education's investigative arm, the Office of Special Investigations (OSI), and told that the inquiry was related to "communist activities taking place at the school." According to the court filings, "The OSI investigator then showed Laban a list of names, and asked Laban to identify who from the list she had ever seen 'engaging in communist activities.' Laban informed the OSI investigator that she did not know what was meant by 'engaging in communist activities' and therefore was unable to answer the question." The list of names included Bloomberg, ten current or former teachers at PSC, several former students and members of Bloomberg's family.

The *New York Times* cited reports that staff members believe the confidential complaints were initiated with the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) representative at PSC, Colleen Siegel. Siegel would not say whether she ratted on Bloomberg.

Yet the potential involvement of the union fits well within the anti-communist traditions of the UFT. All told, more than 400 teachers lost their jobs in the McCarthyite witch hunts of the 1940s and 50s. It was supported politically by the predecessor of the UFT, the Teachers Guild, founded in opposition to the Communist Party-allied Teachers Union. The Teachers Guild went so far as to pass a resolution banning communists from the classroom. The UFT, founded in 1960, was soon led by the prominent anti-communist Albert Shanker, who later led the AFL-CIO's International Affairs Committee.

The move by the current Democratic administration in City Hall to revive a crackdown on the political rights of its teachers and administrators comes out of conditions of intensifying social inequality inside and outside of the classroom. It is a bipartisan policy of class warfare, one that cuts across all races and ethnicities. As elsewhere around the country, New York's continued expansion of charter schools and

"school choice" is aimed at creating educational opportunities for a thin layer at the top while the bulk of city's 1.1 million students are consigned to second- or third-rate education.



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