

Northern California teacher placed on leave after encouraging discussion of school shooting protests

Dan Conway
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The killing of 17 students and staff at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland Florida last February has become the catalyst for mass protests of student youth in the United States and internationally. The demonstrations herald a radicalization of young people and the entrance of a new generation into the political arena.

On March 14, the one-month anniversary of the Parkland shooting, more than 1 million high school students walked out of class to protest gun violence and mass shootings in the US. Some of the protesters limited their actions to limited calls for gun control legislation and “get out the vote” drives. Other protesters pointed to a broader culture of violence, particularly the never-ending US wars in the Middle East and the increasing militarization of American society.

The walkouts arrived on the heels of a nine-day strike by West Virginia teachers. The teachers garnered international attention along with the support of millions of workers after they rejected a back to work order foisted upon them by their union and the state’s billionaire governor.

Most recently, teachers have carried out wildcat strikes in the state of Kentucky along with 40,000 Arizona teachers who marched on the state capital of Phoenix on Wednesday to protest education spending cuts and low salaries. Oklahoma teachers are poised to strike today after years of funding cuts in that state.

The response of individual school administrations to the demonstrations was mixed. While many were largely permissive in their attitudes toward the walkouts, administrators in other schools and districts threatened detentions, suspensions and more severe

punishments to those who participated. More than 100 students in Goshen, Kentucky, for example, defied administrator’s threats and received detention after walking out.

In Concord, California, northeast of San Francisco, students broke through school gates which had been locked in an effort to prevent them from participating in the walkout. Students in other schools around the country reported that their signs, speeches and chants were vetted in advance and many were not allowed to speak to the press without disciplinary consequences.

What the ruling class fears above all else is that this emerging movement of students and teachers will continue to grow, bringing in broader sections of the American working class and breaking free of both the Democrats and the Republicans and their supporters in the trade unions.

In Rocklin, California, outside of the state capital of Sacramento, the high school administration placed history teacher Julianne Benzel on leave after she encouraged a discussion in her classroom about the scheduled March 14 walkout and about free speech and protests. She was allowed to return to work following an investigation into her classroom discussion.

Benzel, who has taught history at Rocklin High School for 20 years, recently spoke to the WSWS about her experience.

WSWS: Could you describe to us the circumstances that led to your being put on administrative leave?

Julianne Benzel: Well, as you know, the school shooting protests happened on March 14, a Wednesday. The Thursday prior, March 8 I believe, I raised this issue in my AP [Advanced Placement] History class. I wanted my students to be aware of the protest and to

consider what was behind it in order to inform their decisions about whether or not to participate.

For my part, I did not take a position either for or against the protests. I simply wanted my students to be informed and to consider the question of protest and free speech more generally. I raised the question of what their attitude would be to a protest of a more “right-wing” character, should such a protest arise, such as a protest over abortion, for example. Was it even appropriate to protest in school at all?

At any rate, Thursday and Friday came and went and I didn’t hear anything further about the discussion. I took some time off at the beginning of the following week and upon my return on Wednesday, I received an early morning phone call. The call was from the school informing me that I was on leave and that I shouldn’t come in. After asking when I could return, the principal later told me that they would “get back to me.”

Later in the day, I received a generic email from the school again telling me I was on leave and providing me with no return date. I had called the school every hour that day and no one even bothered to tell me why I was being put on leave.

WSWS: What was your disciplinary record with the school prior to this incident?

JB: Spotless. I had never been disciplined by the school for any reason whatsoever.

WSWS: How did your story end up getting the media attention it did?

JB: Well it’s actually interesting. My husband and I live very close to campus. Around 3:00 in the afternoon on Wednesday, the day of the protest, a reporter showed up on my doorstep from Channel 13 in Sacramento. I didn’t have any makeup on. I was in my sweat pants, but I figured, ‘Why not? I’ll certainly speak to her about this.’

I suspect that she may have spoken to one of the students at the protest or the other teachers who had heard about the leave announcement and decided to follow up with me. It was at that point that I heard about the grounds for my dismissal. The reporter was given the grounds for my dismissal before I was!

She had a letter indicating that I was being put on leave for “encouraging communication among students about the planned walkout.”

I finally had a meeting Thursday with the administration along with my union representative and,

by this time, I had also obtained the services of a lawyer. The administration told me that that I was pulled out of class because an “investigation” was being conducted. In other words, they didn’t have legitimate reason to pull me out of class. I was being pulled out while they were finding one.

WSWS: What do you think are some of the political implications of what happened to you in terms of due process and freedom of speech?

JB: There certainly are implications. What happened to me clearly is against the first, fifth and sixth amendments to the constitution. This also extends beyond me to the students I teach.

Apparently, the complaints about the discussion arose from two students in the classroom. A parent of one of these students came up to me and revealed that they were pulled out their classes and asked to reveal the content of the discussion I had in class the previous Thursday. These students, the parent revealed, did not go voluntarily, they were pulled out of class. This is the most frightening part of the story to me, regardless of what happens to me and my own career.

This issue is also of great concern for my fellow teachers. We respect each other a lot and a lot of them are worried that something like this could happen to them too.



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