

# Political cartoonist fired by right-wing Pittsburgh Post-Gazette editors over anti-Trump cartoons

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The *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* fired political cartoonist Rob Rogers on Thursday, after weeks of editors blocking his content from the publication. The newspaper's censorship coincides with the rise of openly pro-Trump members on the editorial board.

Rogers is an acclaimed political cartoonist, who has won a number of awards including the National Headliner Award and Thomas Nast Award. Having worked for the *Post-Gazette* since 1993, Rogers has only recently faced rejection of his political content. Nineteen of his ideas and cartoons have been rejected since March, according to his own count.

Tracey DeAngelo, an executive from the newspaper, said that their decisions “had little to do with politics” and more to do with the “working together and the editing process.”

However, the content of Rogers' artwork places politics at the center of any editorial discussion. Of the cartoons that were rejected by the editors, many were highly critical of the anti-democratic and anti-immigrant policies of the Trump administration.

Rogers' rejected cartoons referenced President Trump's discussion of pardoning himself from the ongoing investigation into supposed Russian meddling in the 2016 election, his far-right attack on basic democratic rights and his brutal immigration policies. He also depicted topics relating to racism, including the recent moves by the National Football League (NFL) to force players to stand during the national anthem in the wake of demonstrations against police brutality.

The paper's editors did not give an explanation to Rogers as to why these cartoons would not be published, but they had recently encouraged him to not issue such harsh criticisms of Trump or comment on

other social issues. Prior to firing him, the paper tried to work out a new deal for 2 cartoons and a cartoon strip per week that posed less opposition to the right-wing views of the paper. While they didn't ban him from anti-Trump content, they openly sought to lower “the tone and frequency” of it.

The censoring of Rogers' artwork is a relatively recent phenomena, starting in March after the merger of the editorial boards of the *Post-Gazette* and *Toledo Blade*, both of which are owned by Block Communications.

Keith Burris, the new vice president and editorial director for both newspapers, represents the conservative and right-wing elements that now run the paper. He has written a number of editorials and articles that endorsed Trump's 2016 election campaign and defended his actions since, such as his racist condemnation of immigrants from “shithole countries” in January.

The papers' publisher, John Robinson Block, and Burris had a meeting with Trump on his private plane in 2016. Though the executive layers of the publishing company have long been filled with conservative ideology, the past three months mark a decisive shift to limit left-wing opinions from finding any expression in the *Post-Gazette*.

Burris said on Friday that his goal is to move away from “ideological intent” toward “independent and thoughtful” journalism. To give an idea of the irony of these arbitrary guidelines, recent editorials by Burris run the headlines “Let Trump be Trump” and “John McCain: The last statesman.”

The editorial director's right-wing views have drawn criticism from staff, including a letter from the

Newspaper Guild of Pittsburgh signed by 150 newsroom employees of the *Post-Gazette* that denounced his editorial justifying Trump's "shithole countries" diatribe. The letter opposed the outright racist bigotry of the editorial and clarified that "its sentiments solely represent the opinions of the Block family, owners of the *Post-Gazette*, and not their loyal employees who use our talents to fight against what this editorial stands for."

Upon being dismissed from the company and rejecting an insulting offer to be an independent contractor, Rogers said in a statement: "I fear that today's unjustified firing of a dissenting voice on the editorial pages will only serve to diminish an opinion section that was once one of America's best. I love what I do and will continue to find ways to do it and get it out there. The world needs satire now more than ever."

Many individuals and groups have come to Rogers' defense. The Newspaper Guild wrote, "Given the recent killing of a number of Rob's cartoons critical of President Trump and conservative positions, favorites of the publisher and editorial director, it perhaps is not surprising that this sad day for the *Post-Gazette*, the Pittsburgh community and journalism has arrived."

Leaders of the Ad Hoc Group to Free Rob Rogers organized a rally in downtown Pittsburgh on Friday where dozens denounced the paper. "The local paper is one of the foundations of American democracy," the group wrote in an official statement. "Its purpose is to inform the citizens and to hold the powerful in the public and private sectors accountable. But who is there to hold the *Post-Gazette* accountable? We, the people. That's who."

Rogers' cartoons largely reflect the politics of the Democratic Party. His criticisms of Trump do not mention the role of wider layers of the military-intelligence and political establishment, including the Democrats themselves. The foundations for such a right-wing figure to arise were laid by previous administrations, including Barack Obama, who deported three million undocumented immigrants, escalated military interventions in Asia and the Middle East, and presided over an unprecedented transfer of wealth from the working class to the financial elite.

Nonetheless, the *Post-Gazette's* decision to fire Rogers on the basis of his anti-Trump politics

constitutes a disregard for basic principles of free press and must be understood within the context of right-wing, anti-democratic politics which dominate the mainstream media.

Google and Facebook have initiated an advanced censorship campaign in an effort to block all "fake news" and "divisive content," suppressing left-wing, anti-war and progressive websites. These moves have been aided by their close relationships with the military-intelligence apparatus and federal government.

Local news agencies are not at all isolated from these trends. The FCC is likely to approve the proposal of Sinclair Broadcast Group to buy Tribune Media, after which the national media corporation would own local TV news stations reaching three-quarters of the American population. Sinclair openly pushes a right-wing agenda. David Smith, the executive chairman of Sinclair, told New York Magazine this year, "The print media is so left wing as to be meaningless dribble which accounts for why the industry is and will fade away."

When media and news is dominated by a small handful of corporate interests, information itself is used in the interests of promoting the conservative, right-wing and fascistic politics of the ruling class that news executives represent. Fearing the growing radicalization of the working class and youth, the billionaires atop the media monopolies are eager to suppress left-wing and oppositional views from reaching a wide audience.



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