

Removal of white educator from African American history class in Michigan sparks widespread outrage

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An Advanced Placement (AP) Social Studies teacher in Birmingham, Michigan was barred from teaching an African American History course this spring, following an ugly and deceitful attack by the Birmingham African American Family Network (BAAFN) who charged Scott Craig, a white teacher, with having a “disrespectful” curriculum.

Craig has taught for 32 years and holds Master’s degrees in both African American and labor history. In collaboration with a national educational council including college professors and parents, Craig developed the syllabus for an Advanced Placement pilot program in Birmingham, a largely upper-middle-class suburb of Detroit.

Leading the charge against Craig was the BAAFN and journalist Chastity Pratt Dawsey. The group demanded Craig’s replacement stating that his syllabus failed to emphasize the success of black politicians and entrepreneurs. They alleged that providing data on poverty, police killings and high imprisonment rates among African Americans was “racist.” The group demanded to be allowed to rewrite the curriculum and help select Craig’s replacement, who, they insisted, should be black.

Dawsey, who began her career as an intern at the *New York Times* and worked for the *Detroit Free Press* for 12 years, is a well-known Democratic Party establishment mouthpiece. She began the public campaign against Craig with an opinion piece on February 19 in *Bridge Magazine*. In the article, she makes an outrageous analogy between Craig’s AP course and the right-wing campaign of former Michigan Republican state senator Patrick Colbeck to downplay the civil rights component of Michigan’s social studies curriculum, among other crucial working-class struggles.

Dawsey purportedly became involved after being texted by her son (formerly a student at Groves High School in Birmingham, whom she mentions is on his way to Harvard) that the film “Boyz ‘N the Hood” was included in the AP course syllabus. The film, set in South Central Los Angeles in the 1990s, received two Academy Award nominations and enjoyed wide popularity among audiences, both black and white, for its searing look at poverty and the tragedies of gang life. That the film was listed on the curriculum, however, prompted the highly-agitated Dawsey to give the impression that Craig’s curriculum revolved around the film—a patent lie.

In addition, Craig’s syllabus lists *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Martin Luther King’s *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* and his speech at Riverside Church in New York in opposition to the Vietnam War, a four-part study spanning from “Slavery to Civil War,” through Reconstruction, Jim Crow, the civil rights movement and the position

of African Americans today.

The course addresses the topics of police brutality, the role of affirmative action, the decline of urban centers and “the links between poverty, educational achievement and racism,” the 1967 Detroit riot, “an evaluation of African American political leadership since 1970,” “De Jure v De Facto discrimination and racism” and the re-segregation of schools, among other significant topics. Craig specifically emphasized that students should be ready to debate various points of view.

Dawsey goes on to cite the inclusion of *The New Jim Crow*, a *New York Times* bestseller by Michelle Alexander, in the curriculum to claim that the coursework was “heavily” focused “on the oppression of African Americans.” She claimed this reference “boosts the myth of white superiority.”

While the WSWWS has written of its opposition to the racial preoccupation and reformist notions of *The New Jim Crow*, the book highlights the terrible and disproportionate incarceration of minorities in US prisons. Black men are arrested and imprisoned at a rate 6.5 times that of white men. Such facts are a searing indictment of American capitalism—and of no real interest to the social layer inhabited by Dawsey and her group.

To substantiate her outright sanitizing of history, Dawsey cites the work of Carter G. Woodson, the father of “Negro History Week,” with the selective quote, “If you teach the Negro that he has accomplished as much good as any other race he will aspire to equality and justice without regard to race.” Such paeans to “accomplishments” stripped from their social and political context or class content, are routinely used to deny the existence of class oppression, in the vein of a Ben Carson or a Clarence Thomas—both extremely reactionary apologists for capitalism.

After noting the existence of racist incidents in the area including a noose in a boy’s school bathroom, Dawsey makes an outrageous amalgam between “the syllabus in my kid’s African-American history class” and “by extension the statewide social studies debate” and “socially unacceptable behavior,” e.g., racist attacks. In point of fact, by ending the course designed by Craig, the BAAFN find themselves in alignment with those like Colbeck, including outright racists, who want to prevent young people from learning about the civil rights movement, as well the rise of the labor movement and revolutionary struggles around the world.

The entire sordid operation is a self-serving attempt by well-heeled representatives of the upper middle class seeking not to illuminate history, but to bury it. Rather obviously, they want to exorcise any

inconvenient facts that stand in the way of their climb up the career ladder, or that of their circle of black capitalists and Democratic Party functionaries.

Presenting themselves as the “black community,” this upper middle class layer loathes mention of the problems facing black workers—poverty, unemployment, poor housing, education, and health care as well as mass incarceration. They oppose the unity of the working class, the only basis for overcoming the yawning and catastrophic growth of social inequality and poverty because the working class is not their concern. Money, position, prestige is—and any scurrilous and shameful attack goes in the service of their ambition.

The school board responded to the screed of BAAFN and Dawsey by replacing Craig with a black school counselor—an individual without the academic credentials of Craig. Birmingham district superintendent Mark Dziatczak sent a letter to parents repeating Dawsey’s allegations, deceptively claiming the “resources listed in the course pilot syllabus failed to meet the depth and breadth of African American history” and pledging, in fawning fashion, that “in the future officials will seek input from students, parents and staff on pilot courses like an African-American history class.”

On February 26, a Birmingham school board meeting was held in which BAAFN-affiliated parents spoke at length about how “disrespected” their children were by both the course curriculum and being subjected to a class on African American history taught by a white teacher. Hammie Dogan claimed, “This syllabus is disrespectful and hurting... If I pollute a child’s mind with negative, infuriating, unhealthy things, that is what we will get as a citizen.”

Conrada Jewell said she was “livid” that her children had a field trip to the Holocaust Museum last year in February during Black History Month. She said, “I’m not being disrespectful to my Jewish friends and family, but *this* is when you are going to take this trip?” The comment revealed the profoundly reactionary, if not anti-Semitic, attitude of these right-wing proponents of identity politics.

Addressing the board meeting, Craig argued for his right to teach the class, citing not just his professional credentials but the fact that his parents had put their lives on the line organizing the fight for integrated housing and mobilizing black and white workers in Flint.

To the dismay, no doubt, of the group, he emphasized the broader historical context of the fight for racial equality, stating, “The labor movement came along. This was the beginning, honestly, of the civil rights movement. It didn’t start with Rosa Parks. It started before Rosa Parks. The first sit down was at Dodge Main in Detroit in 1937.” He said this historical connection fueled his passion to acquire a Master’s degrees in African American studies and labor history.

On March 12, Bridge Magazine published Craig’s full rebuttal to Dawsey. In a passionate reply drawing the implications of a dangerous growth of censorship, Craig stated that his removal had “sent a chill down the spines” of his colleagues.

“What is at stake here is the trend in education to stifle teachers’ ability to instruct in areas laden with controversy. Districts will do anything to avoid negative publicity, including throwing their own teachers under the bus.” Craig also cautioned, “As a result of this and other incidents, teachers have now expressed fears about teaching any controversial materials where racism or ethnocentrism is discussed. This includes classic literature, such as Harper Lee’s *To Kill A Mockingbird* or Mark Twain’s *Huck Finn* .”

Many residents, students and former students, and colleagues, black and white, have rejected the vile attack on Craig, opposing the racial

exclusivity and right-wing identitarian outlook of Dawsey and the BAAFN. “I am a former student of Scott Craig’s,” wrote Jeff Patterson. “I think what the district did here is an absolute travesty and truly a loss for the students in the class. In the classes I was in he touched on many important subjects that would be considered uncomfortable for many to confront but served to open your eyes and your mind to better understand our world and our history.”

An African American history scholar from Pennsylvania, speaking to the WSWS, observed, “A look at Craig’s syllabus in its totality should have laid any misgivings to rest. It is one that most scholars, black, white, or otherwise, would agree is neither shallow nor racist.”

The events in Michigan are not separate from the shift to the right within the entire political establishment, including the fascist agitation against immigrants by Trump and the extreme right, and attacks on the basic democratic rights of the working class. An affluent petty-bourgeois layer, with their own fixation on race and demands for increasing racial divisions in society, plays a complementary role. Having cashed in from identity politics, they have emerged as unequivocal defenders of capitalism. The dirty underside of these “debates” on race is the avaricious demands of these sections of the upper middle class.

Government policy, including “black capitalism,” set-asides, affirmative action and the endless promotion of identity politics by the media, most notably the *New York Times*, Dawsey’s training ground, have created a virulently right-wing and outright racist milieu. These elements are deeply hostile to the entire working class, both black and white.

In particular, Dawsey and the BAAFN reflect the rightward trajectory of the Democratic Party—now deeply discredited for its abandonment of all social reform—resting politically on the thin reed of identity politics and the trade union bureaucracy, reinforced by the national security state. A party of endless imperialist wars abroad combined with brutal austerity and censorship at home, the Democrats alongside the Republicans, seek to shred the democratic rights of the working class. It almost goes without saying that the Michigan Education Association, a loyal ally of the big business Democrats, has failed to issue any public defense of Craig or warn of the implications of his removal for teachers everywhere.

But the working class—of all ethnicities—has begun to fight, with a record number of strikes and protests across the US, especially among educators. Socialism is once again on the lips of millions of Americans, striking fear into the ruling elites. The bourgeoisie is seeking new ways to reinforce racial divisions within society—promoting varied forms of racism and anti-Semitism—but the working class is taking their measure. We urge educators, students and workers to join the Socialist Equality Party, unite the working class and build the alternative—a society based on human need not profit, socialism.

The author recommends:

The socioeconomic basis of identity politics: Inequality and the rise of an African American elite

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wsws.org/contact