Who are the San Antonio, Texas, school board members who unanimously fired four teachers?

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On May 10, the San Antonio Independent School District (SAISD) school board voted unanimously to fire Rachell Tucker, a dual language kindergarten teacher at Highland Park Elementary School in San Antonio, Texas. The firing took place after Tucker had advocated for increased safety measures and the halting of in-person learning at her school amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Three other teachers were fired at the same school board meeting, and at least nine other teachers in SAISD have been pressured to resign, with these other victimizations taking place for unspecified reasons.

The firing of Tucker took place within the broader context of the bipartisan campaign to fully reopen schools and repudiate safety measure, pursued by the Biden administration, the corporate media, the teachers' unions, and Texas' Republican Governor Greg Abbott.

For much of the portion of the school board meeting which allowed public comments (viewable here), colleagues and parents pleaded forcefully with the school board not to fire Tucker.

The board started its deliberations on the firings at 11:21pm on Monday, May 10, after roughly an hour of closed session deliberations. The board unanimously terminated probationary contract teachers Elsa Aguilar Cordonejo, kindergarten teacher Rachell Tucker, and Rameshwar Pathak, at the end of 2020-21 school year, "in the best interest of the district." Continuing contract teacher Jose Castro was terminated unanimously for "good cause." Additionally, associate principal Dr. Mateen Diop's contract was not renewed at the end of the 2020-21 school year.

It is worth examining the backgrounds of the school board members responsible for unanimously victimizing these educators.

According to the agenda, the following members where present when the board unanimously voted to terminate the four teachers: Patti Radle, Arthur Valdez, Debra Guerrero, Ed Garza, Steve Lecholop, Christina Martinez and Alicia Sebastian-Perry.

Patti Radle is a longtime board member, first elected to the SAISD Board of Trustees for District 5 in May of 2011. Radle was an SAISD elementary school teacher for 12 years before joining the Board. Before her time on the school board she was on the San Antonio City Council from 2003-2007. She was endorsed by then-Mayor Julian Castro before she even committed to run, according to *My San Antonio.* Castro is a Democrat who later served as US Secretary of Housing and Urban Development under the Obama administration from July 2014 to January 2017, later running in the 2020 Democratic presidential primary. Castro was also a council member for District 7 from 2001-2005.

According to the news blog Walker Report, a "Friends of Patti Radle" party celebrating her four years as a councilwoman included Texas Democratic big shots such as Castro and Charlie Gonzales, a member of the US House of Representatives for Texas's District 20. Also present was Jaime Martinez, Texas State President of the Labor Council for Latin American Advancement, which is affiliated with the AFL-CIO and the Change to Win coalition, which includes five unions: the Teamsters, United Farm Workers, SEIU, UFCW and IBT.

Arthur Valdez was endorsed by the *San Antonio Express-News* for the District 4 election in 2013 and 2017. Valdez accepted $1,000 from the law firms Escamilla and Poneck, LLP, which is listed as "a full-service, minority-owned law firm representing clients in both the public and private sectors," and from Linebarger Goggan Blair & Sampson LLP, which serves as one of the nation's largest government debt collectors and was the subject of a CNN Money investigation in 2015 that revealed the firm's practice of threatening debtors with jail and arrest.

Both firms were accused of bribing city council members, with a founding partner of Linebarger even going to jail, and the SAISD Board contracted with both firms to represent the district in several cases.

Ed Garza, Democrat and former mayor of San Antonio, also took money from these same law firms. According to his page on SAISD's website, Garza served eight years as a municipal elected official before being elected mayor in 2001 and serving two terms.

The page states that "Garza has served on numerous corporate and governing boards including the Texas A&M University Foundation, San Antonio chapter of American Institute of Architects, San Antonio Historic Design and Review Board, CPS Energy, San Antonio Water Systems, City South Management Authority, National League of Cities, Fannie Mae Advisory Board, NALEO, and Harrah's Entertainment Inc."

It also states that he has "testified before Congress and given presentations and keynote speeches to groups including the National Security Agency, U.S. Embassy's International Initiative (Argentina, China and Mexico)."

Alicia Perry was endorsed by the San Antonio Alliance of

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Teachers and Support Personnel, the union representing teachers and non-administrative employees in SAISD, during her run for office in 2019. She was also endorsed by the Texas American Federation of Teachers (Texas AFT), with the San Antonio Report noting that the union donated to her campaign through in-kind donations such as printing services.

Debra Guerrero also serves as Senior Vice President of Strategic Partnerships and Government Relations at The NRP Group, a $750 million real estate development and management group. She was the Chair of the Susan G. Komen San Antonio Board, and has affiliated with other nonprofit groups such as Texas Lyceum and Leadership San Antonio.

PRNewswire wrote at the time of her appointment to Senior Vice President in September 2020 that Guerrero had previously "served as a senior member of NRP's development team focused on legislative and regulatory advocacy at the state and local municipality level in Texas." The NRP Group has developed over 18,000 units of multifamily housing worth over $2 billion.

PRNewswire also stated that "Currently, she serves on the executive boards of several national and Texas housing industry organizations including the Texas Association of Affordable Housing Providers (TAAHP), Texas Association of Builders and the National Association of Homebuilders Affordable Housing (NAHB). Additionally, she was selected to serve as a Trustee of BUILD-PAC, NAHB's Political Action Committee, which disburses over $3 million annually to pro-housing, pro-business federal congressional candidates."

Express-News stated in an article on the paper's board recommendations in 2013, which included recommending Guerrero, that Guerrero "mishandled her job by developing a cozy relationship with the Kell Muñoz architectural firm, which conducted business with the city and is now part of a group that is managing most of SAISD's bond projects."

Christina Martinez is an acolyte of Radle, who is quoted by the *San Antonio Report* describing her as "a strong person who listens very well to others, regardless of what their positions might be, but she's a person who makes up her own mind about things." Radle added that Martinez is "influenced by the commitment to do good, not necessarily by what others want her to do." One can imagine that the commitment to "good" and being "strong" means that she will be equally ruthless against teachers.

Steve Lecholop accepted over $23,000 in donations from a Washington, D.C.-based group called Leadership for Educational Equity (LEE) and its associated PAC during his run for the SAISD school board. As of 2017, LEE raised more than $29 million from donors like billionaire Michael Bloomberg, one of the most fervent backers of charter school privatization schemes in the US.

The history of the SAISD school board members makes clear that the attack on Rachell Tucker and other teachers is not merely a regional fight involving the local school board, but rather encompasses the entire political establishment and the unions who have backed many of the same school board members. The unions have cynically kept San Antonio educators in the dark about their role in electing people who fired their own members.

This is not the first time that SAISD has targeted teachers for firing. According to a March 2018 statement by the San Antonio Alliance, "scores of SAISD teachers, some with decades of experience, were told to resign or be terminated. As they waited in Human Resources to be informed about their future, they were greeted with flyers for an SAISD Teacher Job Fair, to be held May 19." To add insult to injury, the firings took place during teacher appreciation week. These firings included 132 teachers and took place after the charterization of a school in the district.

According to a local ABC affiliate report at the time, "three assistant principals [...] were given a list of targeted teachers months before the evaluations were completed." One of the assistant principals confirmed the existence of "Red lists of teachers that basically campus administrators were told that they had to get rid of, even if they went into somebody's room and did an observation of the teacher and saw positive things."

Another assistant principal, Lisa Marie Gonzales, stated, "In the fall of 2017, all administrators were given a list of teachers that the principal, Ms. Cooper, said we must 'get rid of' through various forms of documentation," and that the list was to be withheld from teachers.

The response of the unions in 2017-18 was merely to call for an outside investigation and for a local rally to let off steam. The unions' fecklessness and complicity in the attacks against teachers was underscored during the COVID-19 pandemic, when no attempt was made by the Texas AFT to mobilize any of their more than 50,000 members in other districts across the state to oppose the attacks on teachers.

The victimization and firing of educators should be grounds for immediate strike action in San Antonio and the organization of solidarity strikes among educators and other sections of the workforce to defend jobs and demand the reinstatement of the victimized workers.

In order to carry forward such a struggle, educators must form their own rank-and-file committees independent of the unions and both big business parties, to fight for their jobs, safety and lives. We urge all educators in San Antonio and across Texas to join the Texas Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which was formed last fall to oppose the reckless reopening of schools, and to build local committees in every school, district and neighborhood to carry forward this fight and the broader defense of public education.

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