

Tennessee educators oppose attacks on teachers' free speech rights

Tennessee Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee
19 July 2021

The Tennessee Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee opposes the legislation (HB 0580/SB 0623) passed by Tennessee's right-wing legislature aimed at intimidating teachers and attacking their free speech and academic freedom.

This legislation includes a prohibition against instruction that “promot[es] division between, or resentment of, a race, sex, religion, creed, nonviolent political affiliation, social class, or class of people.”

Later, the bill nonsensically qualifies this prohibition with the claim that “this section does not prohibit” schools or instructors from making use of textbooks or instructional materials that discuss “the history of an ethnic group” or include “the impartial discussion of controversial aspects of history” or “the impartial instruction on the historical oppression of a particular group of people based on race, ethnicity, class, nationality, religion, or geographic region.”

This distinction between the “promotion” of divisions and the “impartial discussion” of them seems to be intentionally vague. We cannot escape the conclusion that the legislators hope to intimidate teachers into avoiding controversial topics to avoid getting into trouble.

A series of similar laws has been passed throughout the country in states with Republican-dominated legislatures. As awful as they are, these laws are only the opening shot in a broader campaign to undermine any kind of socially critical instruction in schools. Two laws recently passed in Florida go even further than the legislation in Tennessee and serve as a warning to educators everywhere.

The Florida laws restructure civics education in high schools and require that students pass a civic literacy assessment either in high school or in college in order to prove their grasp of the supposed evils of communism as compared with the supposedly more democratic US political system. The legislation requires public

universities to survey faculty and students on their political beliefs and face a possible loss of funding if not enough students and faculty profess their allegiance to a right-wing perspective. Nothing in the legislation guarantees the anonymity of the responses, which brings into question what will be done to those individuals who answer in a way that displeases the state's right-wing legislature.

From the anticommunist McCarthyite witch-hunts in the United States to the purging of Jewish and left-wing academics from German universities by the Nazi party, the practice of drawing up lists of dissidents has a dark history.

The Tennessee Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee condemns this legislation and stands with Florida primary and secondary school and university teachers and students in opposing these laws.

Already, the Tennessee legislation has been used to target an individual teacher. Matthew Hawn, a tenured high school social studies teacher in Sullivan County, Tennessee, came under attack the day after the state legislature passed HB 0580/SB 0623 into law. Hawn assigned his class to read an essay titled, “The First White President,” by Ta-Nehisi Coates, that was published in the *Atlantic*. For this he was censured by the school board and suspended without pay pending possible termination.

Our committee has fundamental disagreements with the theoretical foundations and historical claims expressed by Hawn himself and outlined in this essay. This outlook is inspired by the concepts of critical race theory, which posits the existence of irreconcilable racial divisions in our society, above all in the working class. Nevertheless, we oppose all efforts to censor Hawn and other teachers who have views similar to his. The open discussion of a variety of points of view is of the utmost importance to the education of young people in our society.

Social class is the fundamental division in our society,

not “race, sex, religion, or creed.” Class divisions and the resentments they produce are real, not the mere inventions of teachers. Moreover, the current fascistic and anti-socialist attacks on teachers are taking place in the context of a dramatic intensification of real class divisions.

Nowhere are divisions of class more apparent than in the response of the political representatives of the ruling class to the emerging coronavirus variants, which threaten to reverse even the meager progress accomplished by the partial vaccination of the US and world population. The emergence of these variants is the direct result of the politicians’ criminally irresponsible policies of herding workers back into unsafe working conditions and teachers and students back into unsafe schools. Meanwhile, the wealthy continue to have access to safe working environments and the best care the medical profession has to offer.

Ignoring the urgent warnings of the World Health Organization and epidemiologists around the world, the Biden administration and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have reversed masking recommendations, continuing in all fundamental respects the very same policies pursued by the Trump administration. This has provided fertile ground for the virus to evolve, further threatening the lives of workers and their children.

The Delta variant now presents a triple threat in the schools. Under conditions where children under 12 years old, roughly half the school-aged population, are not yet eligible for vaccination, and most children 12 years old or older remain unvaccinated, the withdrawal of mask recommendations will fuel the spread of the disease, promoting the evolution of new and even more dangerous variants, and killing or permanently disabling an untold number of children, teachers, their family members and the broader population.

National divisions in vaccine production and distribution, which have created a situation where most of the world’s poorer countries have little or no access to any COVID-19 vaccine, are further fueling these same processes.

If human life rather than private profit were the priority, the pandemic could be brought under control within months. However, the capitalist classes in nearly every country have not taken the necessary measures to end the pandemic because doing so would run counter to their profit interests.

The wealth divide in American society continues to grow, intensifying the class struggle on a global scale. Aided and abetted by the corrupt, corporatist trade unions

and their pseudo-left acolytes, the American capitalists are pursuing record profits at the expense of human lives. Worldwide, billionaires’ wealth surged 60 percent during the first year of the pandemic alone.

Again, teachers have not *created* these class divisions and antagonisms. The capitalist class itself is working with ruthless abandon to deepen the existing divisions in our society, which is the real cause of deepening resentments. How could we *not* resent the fact that the capitalist class is threatening the lives of working people and our children simply in order to enrich itself?

The capitalists are well aware that they cannot get away with their homicidal behavior indefinitely without producing a massive social explosion the likes of which the world has never seen. Under conditions in which the class struggle increasingly threatens to break out of the stranglehold of the corporatist trade unions, which for decades have functioned as little more than an auxiliary police force for workplace management, the capitalist class, above all its more fascistic elements, are concerned about the role that public education institutions could come to play in the discussion and dissemination of ideas critical of the capitalist system itself.

So, we understand *why* the Tennessee legislature is attacking our free speech and trying to intimidate us into silence. However, understanding and justification are not the same thing. HB 0580/SB 0623 is unjustifiable and unconstitutional. Teachers have the first amendment right to discuss and oppose the acts of class warfare of the capitalist class, including in the classroom.

We demand the immediate repeal of HB 0580/SB 0623, the immediate reinstatement with back pay of Michael Hawn, and an end to all further efforts to victimize individual teachers or their schools for the content of their instruction.



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