

“We are the ones who hold the true power—labor power. And a genocide could be stopped, just like that.”

New York City educator speaks out against Gaza genocide

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4 January 2024

The *World Socialist Web Site* interviewed a New York City educator about the genocide in Gaza and its impact on educators and students in the New York City Public Schools. The educator asked to remain anonymous due to concerns over possible victimizations.

Educators who publicly speak out on the Gaza genocide face intense repercussions, including harassment, threats and job loss.

Right-wing media outlets have already slandered educators who have spoken out against the mass slaughter by Israel in Gaza and sought their dismissal. The right-wing gutter press, such as the Murdoch-owned *New York Post* regularly attend pro-Palestine demonstrations looking for individuals whom they can misquote or doxx. No doubt the photographs they take supplement the dossier of the New York Police Department, who have been out in force at protests against the Gaza genocide.

The schools chancellor, David Banks, a close associate of the city’s right-wing Democratic Mayor, Eric Adams, as the educator notes below, issued a warning in November in an email to educators: “When speech and action—even on one’s personal time—undermines the mission or core functions of NYCPS, we will review and take appropriate action on a case-by-case basis.”

Educators have received little support from the organization that claims to represent their interests, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), or its parent body, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). While some educators have been fairly represented in conflicts over their freedom of speech by their building representatives recently, the UFT’s bureaucratic apparatus, headed by President Michael Mulgrew, has refused to call for a cease-fire or call the Zionist military incursions into Gaza what they are, a genocide.

Randi Weingarten, president of the AFT, called for a cease-fire in Gaza in a highly qualified statement at year’s end, but she continues her central role as a state operative and supporter of the Biden administration. She had earlier opposed a cease-fire resolution put before the AFL-CIO executive council and flew to Israel to give political cover to Israeli leaders. (The interview below was conducted before Weingarten made her reversal on the cease-fire.)

Not only educators, but students as well, have been called antisemitic whenever they oppose the genocide in Gaza. Students who protested last month against support for Israel at Hillcrest High in Queens were vilified in the media and by right-wing City Council members. Students in West Orange, New Jersey, received death threats after they organized a walkout in November against the

genocide.

The censorship of pro-Palestinian views among educators and student has become even more egregious with the McCarthyite campaign organized by Zionists, the far right and the state, which forced the resignation of Harvard University President Claudine Gay.

Nevertheless, the repressive atmosphere has not prevented New York City educators from protesting the crimes of the Netanyahu regime. One protest in November demanded that the UFT issue a resolution calling for a cease-fire. Another last month protested Randi Weingarten’s appearance at an awards ceremony.

We encourage other educators around the United States and internationally to contact the WSWS to register their opposition to the genocide. A powerful movement can and must be built that will orient educators and students toward the working class—the single social force that can stop the mass murder in Gaza and prevent the Biden administration from implementing its plans for world war.

World Socialist Web Site: Why do you think the United States has collaborated so closely with Israel in implementing this genocide?

Educator: The US and Zionist influencers have always had a close relationship since World War II. It’s been a discreet but strong relationship, one that many would consider unethical, given the outright violations of the Geneva conventions and the illegal settlements on Palestinian land.

Many US citizens don’t agree with such close ties with such an aggressive colonial power like Israel. There’s a false notion of democracy, but democracy has been eroded systematically. Our government is only able to present itself as a great example of democracy and transparency because of the corporate media propaganda that dominates every aspect of our lives. They’d like us to believe that by voting, the people directly elect their leaders.

But more and more, it’s becoming clear that politicians can be bought and sold by corporations, campaign lobbyists, and private interests who financially benefit from politicians acting in their interests, including the interests of the Zionist lobby. The US has a geopolitical stake in maintaining Israel as a friend in the Middle East. There are gas fields there, and the erasure of Palestinian people, culture, heritage and institutions means complete dominance in trade routes and economic development for Israel and the US.

WSWS: What is the mood among educators in New York City that you know?

Educator: The mood is disgust and irritation. Since Israel’s bombing

of Gaza started, teachers and students alike have been mortified. Many students ask questions about how the conflict started, what the fighting is all about, and what they can do to stop the bombings. They want to know the truth. Everywhere, students and everyday people started to recognize the Palestinian flag and saw it as a symbol of resistance from colonial occupation, repression of an indigenous people, and apartheid. Our schools chancellor, David Banks, weaponized his position and privilege to email all staff to threaten NYCPS staff rights to free speech outside our workplace.

This infuriated many NYC public school staff, as we felt we were being silenced, even if and when we chose to engage in expressions of concern or outrage after contractual hours, as private citizens. Since then, the mood has been one of utter rage that our “boss” would dare to tell us what we can’t do on our own time.

WSWS: What has been educators’ reaction to the media witch-hunt against support for Palestine and the chancellor’s letter?

Educator: For some, David Banks’ threat served to force us into self-censorship. Many educators just do what’s expected of them, that is, teach the curriculum that we are expected to teach. But for others, it drove many to create lesson plans explaining how the Palestine-Israel conflict got started, how Palestine got partitioned and why, who became oppressed, and who the oppressors were. Students, when given both sides of the story, are very quick to think critically and formulate their own opinions. As the carnage rages on, more and more teachers are teaching current events because (1) the students want to know, (2) what’s happening today is unprecedented, and (3) civic engagement and political discourse have always been encouraged in NYCPS.

Israel’s genocide against the Palestinians will change the future of the world for generations to come—it has to be explained.

WSWS: There have been attempts by educators in New York to demand Randi Weingarten as well as the UFT leadership call for a cease-fire, which have fallen on deaf ears. Can you comment on this?

Educator: Randi Weingarten has been a longtime, blind supporter of Israel. It’s unconscionable that after 85+ days of daily massacres of civilians, mostly children, she has not yet called for a cease-fire, which is the bare minimum.

As a leader of school districts nationwide, she is exposing herself as a hypocrite if she professes to care about millions of small children across America and yet watch 10,000 Palestinian children’s skulls and bodies get crushed under two-ton bombs, paid for with our taxpayer dollars. She’s in a privileged position to use her platform to lead teachers nationwide in a work stoppage until the Israeli government stops the carnage—but no. She’s been in bed with the Israel lobby for years, without apology. She should be investigated and deposed.

WSWS: While Biden is supplying billions to Israel, New York City schools will receive some of the deepest budget cuts ever. How will this impact you and your students?

Educator: Our school buildings are aging fast, many of the oldest buildings are over 100 years old, and are in need of repairs, upgrades, modernized HVAC systems, and even pipes that aren’t corroded and carrying drinking water. Many fountains emit brown water, our plumbing is old, and most buildings have bare minimum custodial staff.

In addition to building integrity issues that school facilities directors turn a blind eye to, we have hundreds of schools relying on parent donations, fundraising efforts, and other means in order to get our students basic necessities, like supplies for all their classes. Arts and humanities programs get cut, after school programs get cut, and

there’s just a paucity of resources. It’s shameful.

There’s also a lot of waste, fraud and abuse, such as multimillion-dollar contracts with vendors who offer products and services, devices and equipment that don’t last. It’s so frustrating. It leaves many Title 1 schools especially scrounging around and making do with what little we have. The school budgets keep shrinking, despite the needs that keep growing.

Meanwhile, Mayor Adams prioritizes corporations and businesses over the basic needs of millions of working class students and families. There are corporate tax breaks, real estate subsidies and incentives to landlords and bourgeois investors who gentrify neighborhoods, but no money for education, housing or healthcare. It’s deplorable that still, we have no single payer healthcare—not in New York state, not anywhere.

People are dying. People have died of COVID needlessly. Many lives could have been saved. We mourn our dead and have to fight for the living. Our city’s children deserve better, this pro-police, pro-corporation, anti-people mayor has to step down. He’s done enough damage—some irreparable. We have to end mayoral control and give control of schools back to the communities who know our students best.

WSWS: Would you support strike action by workers against arms production and transport of weapons to Israel? Can an anti-genocide movement by educators contribute to this?

Educator: It’s workers that hold all the labor power. If workers anywhere agreed to a work stoppage, even just for a day, it would cost the company bosses millions in profits. So yes, not enough workers realize that if they were to unite on the issues of morality that we are faced with, we could send a very strong message to the powers that be, that we are not just cogs in a wheel. We are the ones who hold the true power—labor power. And a genocide could be stopped, just like that.

It’s workers who steer the ships, planes, and trucks, workers who operate the machinery, workers who educate the next generation of workers. Class consciousness is something that develops when our working conditions make us see that the current system we live in benefits a minority class of billionaires, and hurts the majority class—the working class.



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