

Richmond, Virginia history teacher removed for lesson on Gaza genocide

Clement Daly
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A Richmond, Virginia, area high school teacher has been removed from her position for speaking to her students about the ongoing genocide in Gaza. On February 21, the Henrico County Public Schools District announced that history teacher Catherine Massalha's remarks violated school policy and she would no longer be allowed to teach at Deep Run High School, but would remain employed by the district.

Massalha's removal is just the latest in a global campaign to intimidate and silence any and all opposition among workers, students, and youth to the war in Gaza, which has the full backing of the Biden administration. It is also part of a broader assault on freedom of speech, academic freedom on campuses, and public education in general.

Behind the actions against Massalha are powerful right-wing forces. After a student recorded Massalha in December, the student's father sent the 12-minute audio recording to the Defense of Freedom Institute (DFI), and the recording and a transcript were subsequently published by the *Washington Examiner* in late January.

The DFI is a conservative nonprofit educational advocacy group founded by Robert Eitel and Jim Blew, two former US Department of Education (DOE) officials under the Trump administration. In addition to its advocacy against teachers' unions, and for school choice and "parental rights" in education, the DFI is a key driver of the recent flood of Title VI inquiries launched by the Biden DOE and directed against student and faculty opposition to the Israeli genocide.

Nearly every accusation against Massalha is belied by the actual transcript of her remarks. Indeed, the audio recording opens with Massalha placing her remarks in the context of the educational framework of the school district. "Henrico County is supposed to be a public school system of equity. It is supposed to be one of culturally responsive education and it is supposed to be anti-racist," she explains. "So by doing all of that, I have a responsibility to talk to you about what's happening in Gaza."

She then proceeds to clarify that her remarks are not aimed at the Jewish people or Judaism, but at the actions of the state of Israel with the direct backing of the United States, a point she reiterates multiple times in her remarks. "I'm going to start off and I'm going to say that this is not about religion. It has nothing to do with religion. This is not me criticizing a religion. This is me talking about a country and what it is doing and what my country is doing right now that is wrong. It's about what is happening to a group of people."

From there, Massalha connects her remarks on Gaza to previous lessons, places it in a broader context of other recent world events and highlights the relationship of the US government in each.

"Now, you guys studied the Holocaust in middle school, right? And you studied that as it was a horrible thing, correct? And it was. It was an awful thing. Genocides are horrible.

"There are approximately eight or more genocides happening right now in the world," she continues. "Ethnic cleansings and genocides are happening to different groups in different parts of the world. There is one happening in China, but we're not funding that one. We have said things, but we're not really taking a very big stand to stop it as a country. We haven't put strong sanctions on China.

"There is one going on in Myanmar that is still happening. I mean, we've said things about it as a country and we've made statements, the UN has made statements about it, but this one in Gaza—this one in Gaza, our country is funding. Your taxpayer money for decades has been going to support the occupation of Palestine by the Israeli government," she explains.

Massalha then describes the "occupation of Palestine by the Israeli government," reiterating, "Please make sure you are understanding: I am talking about a government. I am talking about an occupying country—a country that occupies another country or a group of people that occupy it." It is this factual presentation of the Israeli occupation and the asymmetrical and criminal character of its assault against the Gazan population that has drawn the most ire of the Zionists.

"So, let me explain to you what Palestine is. Gaza is a strip of land that's about the size of Richmond that was walled in in 2006 by the Israeli government. [unintelligible] is walled. There is a wall around it. Those people are stuck there. The only way in and out of Gaza is through Israeli checkpoints—soldiers let them in and out. The only things that can get in is what comes in through those checkpoints. Nothing comes in through the sea. Israel does not allow ships to come in through the sea [unintelligible] to Gaza. There is a very small part of the sea [unintelligible] that Gaza people can fish. If they go out beyond that point, they can be shot either by the Israeli government or the Egyptian government.

"There is a checkpoint at the Egyptian border—nothing except humanitarian goods come in through the Egyptian border. So those would be things people need like medicine, supplies like soap, food, clothing—no military [or] any type of equipment comes in. Gaza does not have an army. It has a makeshift government that was elected in 2007 a year after the wall was built. That's what Hamas is. Hamas is resistance fighters. It is a resistance to the occupation. It is pretty much [unintelligible]. There has been no election by the people [unintelligible] since 2007. I really need you to understand that."

"The vast majority of people in Gaza are not Hamas, they are people. And there's only one [unintelligible] hospital still standing right now. The rest have been destroyed. Did you know that

destroying hospitals in war is called a war crime? Killing innocent civilians is a war crime. This is not even a war because Gaza has no army. Gaza does not have aircraft, they do not have navies, they do not have any of that. They don't have tanks—any weapons they have, they literally got from Israel. It's really important to understand that. This isn't a war. It didn't start on October 7. It started before."

Notwithstanding the pearl clutching of the establishment, Massalha delivered these remarks to high school students, a generation which has grown up online and is more than capable of verifying her presentation with countless reports from the United Nations, international human rights organizations, or the recent hearings in the International Criminal Court, all of which are easily accessible.

Moreover, in their ubiquitous use of social media, these students have undoubtedly already been exposed to ample photographic and video evidence of the unfolding genocide in Gaza.

Even so, Massalha invites her students to challenge her presentation. "If you think that everything I'm saying is a lie, and I'm giving you propaganda, come prove me wrong. Please. Go for it," she says. "I have no problem with that."

The supposedly "radicalized" teacher's prescription is fairly standard. "There are things you can do. ... Kids do things. You can send letters to your congressman. All you've got to do is look it up: 'How do I contact my congressman?' 'Ceasefire now.' Look it up. It'll tell you to sign this petition, go on a march, tell people, make people aware, just educate yourself and others."

According to the January report in the *Washington Examiner*, the school district had initially defended Massalha, responding, "Current events are often used as real-world learning opportunities for students, especially in history and civics classes. Age-appropriate discussions generally include ties to previous learning and opportunities for students to consider personal—and differing—perspectives on local, national, and global issues."

The school district has since dropped its defense of Massalha in the face of the pressure campaign. Officials now claim Massalha's lesson "contradicted guidance provided to all high school history departments earlier this year" and that the "school division does not condone the manner in which her comments were delivered."

The public comment session of a Henrico County School Board meeting held the day after the announcement was dominated by the campaign against Massalha. Of the 17 speakers, 12 addressed the removal of Massalha, with half defending her. A review of the meeting, which is posted online, reveals the deep support for Massalha among students and the community. Sustained applause can be seen from approximately two-thirds of the audience for every speaker defending her.

Like most major cities, Richmond has witnessed persistent mass anti-genocide protests drawing thousands of participants since October.

Athena Savoji, the only Deep Run student to speak, described the threats and physical violence she and other students have endured for defending Massalha. Savoji also noted that the online petition she started for Massalha had garnered more than a thousand supporters in four days.

Charles Turner with the Virginia Muslim Civic League noted in his remarks that "the Deep Run Muslim Student Association has been left without a faculty sponsor." This is of a piece with the national campaign being waged against pro-Palestinian student groups.

In addition to the powerful national right-wing forces standing behind the campaign against Massalha, the character of its local advocates was also on full display at the school board meeting.

Several speakers cited their ties to the military-intelligence establishment and have careers in finance, insurance, and commercial real estate.

For example, Phil Bonnie, a senior real estate adviser, introduced himself as "an honorably discharged medically retired Marine Corps veteran who served in Iraq and Afghanistan. After my service, I was employed by the DOD [U.S. Department of Defense] and the State Department in various war zones around the world in an intelligence-gathering capacity. You would be hard-pressed to find an American who has spent more time outside of the USA cleaning sand out of crevices than myself."

Neal Thompson referenced the Bible in his remarks and decried Massalha's "radicalization." He blamed the school district for the "extreme culture we seem to have developed for diversity, equity, and inclusion which is probably why we have the teachers we have, to diversify, but not to teach." Thompson's biography includes serving as a colonel with the Virginia Defense Force Department of Military Affairs, in addition to being the former vice president of Fidelity Corporation, former chairman of the Executive Committee of Wheat Insurance Services, and the president of Financial Services Consultants Incorporated.

Retired attorney John Lucas introduced himself as a "graduate of West Point and a veteran of infantry combat." He is in fact a former Army Ranger and Green Beret and has published contributions in the conservative online magazine *The Federalist*. In his contribution, Lucas repeats the dehumanizing propaganda used by Zionists to justify the ongoing genocide, charging Massalha with failing to make "mention of the subhuman atrocities perpetrated by those she calls 'resistance fighters': multiple rapes, necrophilia, mothers and children roasted alive, or other subhuman atrocities."

The Socialist Equality Party and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality call for the immediate reinstatement of Catherine Massalha and encourage teachers and students to defend her as part of a broader struggle against imperialist war and the attack on public education and democratic rights.



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