

Council on American-Islamic Relations files lawsuit on behalf of teachers suspended for pro-Palestinian views

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Three Maryland public school teachers, placed on leave after posting pro-Palestinian views online, filed a lawsuit last month to challenge their suspensions. The teachers, represented by the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), filed a complaint against the Maryland Board of Education and the Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS).

From its Maryland headquarters in Baltimore, CAIR hosted a press conference on February 15 announcing the complaint filed on behalf of teachers Hajur El-Haggan, Anike Robinson and Angela Wolf. The three teachers, who were placed on leave in November and December of last year, approached CAIR independently for help with clearing their names and being able to return to their classrooms.

El-Haggan, a math teacher at Argyle Middle School in Silver Spring, was placed on leave due to her email signature containing the phrase, “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free.” A previous complaint filed by CAIR on El-Haggan’s behalf further claimed the educator was targeted for wearing pins with phrases, such as “Free Gaza” and “Free Palestine.”

Robinson, an art and English teacher at Westland Middle School in Bethesda, was placed on leave after some parents wrote to the school’s principal, Alison Serino, complaining about posts on Robinson’s social media accounts, allegedly of “an antisemitic nature,” according to a letter Serino sent to parents.

Robinson’s posts included an image criticizing the Israel Defense Force’s attacks on children and civilian infrastructure in Gaza, as well as a post expressing “solidarity with the Palestinian people against Israel’s settler colonial state-sanctioned apartheid program of genocide back[ed] by U.S. imperialism.”

In the third case, Wolf, a Takoma Park Middle School teacher and department head of English Language and Development, was placed on leave for posts such as a cartoon showing an Israeli tank taking aim at the NICU unit of the Al-Shifa hospital in North Gaza. In November, Wolf posted support for bus drivers in Northern Virginia “who refused to transport Zionists to the pro Israel rally” in Washington D.C. from Dulles International Airport.

The teachers have remained on leave while MCPS investigated their cases, but CAIR in its complaint filed this month stated that “through these suspensions, the Board of Education and MCPS are pursuing an illegal, Israel-specific, viewpoint-suppression policy it has not adopted for any other matter of public concern.”

CAIR said the three teachers “expressed themselves in the same ways they and their colleagues had about other topics. Whether online or in school, teachers have long been allowed to express their views on a range of public topics—from racial justice to the war in Ukraine—as the First Amendment requires.”

Additionally, CAIR claimed that in “removing three teachers from their classrooms, the Board of Education and MCPS officials have prioritized their ideological quest to eliminate a common viewpoint—for a ceasefire ... from the ranks of their teachers.”

CAIR attorney Rawda Fawaz said the organization wants all three teachers to be reinstated to their positions and to receive public apologies from the MCPS and the Board of Education. At the press conference last month, Fawaz said Montgomery County had “acted to suppress viewpoints critical of Israel and the daily massacres that we’ve all watched unfold in abject horror. This is a textbook violation of

the First Amendment.”

Robinson described decades of dedicated teaching and social activism, as well as a situation that took place this school year involving an argument between a Jewish and a Muslim student. Robinson worked with the students to design a symbol of unity, a palm-shaped Middle Eastern amulet known as a Hamsa, which inspired Robinson to have a similar design tattooed on her arm.

Robinson insisted, “The important thing to remember today is that our educational systems thrive on critical thinking. And I’ve been creating safe environments for my students for decades, day after day.”

For her part, Wolf began by holding up a copy of *Refugee* by Alan Gratz, which she taught last year to eighth grade students, saying, “If you know me, or have read this book, then you know we are not here today about my job performance as an educator. No, we are here because, in my personal time, I communicated my belief that the indiscriminate killing of civilians is wrong.”

In reference to the Facebook posts she made expressing sympathy for Palestinians, Wolf denied that they were antisemitic, saying, “Montgomery County Public Schools publicly maligned my character and took me away from a job and the people to whom I have dedicated my heart and mind because of one opinion, in fact an opinion widely agreed upon by the international community, that bombing hospitals and the indiscriminate killing of noncombatants is wrong.”

El-Haggan said she was denied due process by being placed on leave before an investigation could be conducted and before she even knew what the reason was. “My opinion is my wrong,” El-Haggan said, referring to the school administrators’ response to her email signature calling for Palestinian freedom.

CAIR’s lawsuit, which has the support of the American Civil Liberties Union, comes amid a global witch-hunt stirred up to silence international dissent against the ongoing genocidal policy of the Israeli government in Gaza, backed by the US and the other imperialist powers, by equating criticism of hospital bombings and forced starvation with antisemitism.

In Germany, pro-Palestinian slogans have been banned at mass demonstrations. Filmmakers in Germany have been lambasted as “disturbing and propagandistic” for expressing sympathy or shining a

light on the plight of the Palestinians. In the UK, the government has responded to mass protests with heavy police presence and the invocation of the Public Order Act.

In the US, those who voice empathy for Gazans enduring death and destruction, from the three Maryland teachers to educators in New York City who have been doxxed for participating in demonstrations against the genocide, risk their careers. University student groups opposing Israel’s genocide have also been suspended or banned across the country, including in Democratic Party strongholds, such as New York and New Jersey.

This anti-democratic campaign, supported by both the Democrats and Republicans, to silence opposition to American imperialism poses the question of an independent socialist movement of the working class against genocide and war. It is only such a movement that can protect and defend the fundamental democratic rights of the population, including the right to free speech.



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