

At House hearing on “antisemitism,” school officials placate GOP fascists, back suppression of anti-genocide protests

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On Wednesday, the heads of three large public school districts in the United States became the latest school officials to testify before the House of Representatives Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary and Secondary Education on the alleged rise of “antisemitic” behavior on school campuses. Previous hearings under the umbrella of the Committee on Education and the Workforce featured testimony from Ivy League presidents, some of whom, such as former Harvard President Claudine Gay, were forced to step down after balking at fully embracing the committee’s equating of opposition to genocide against Palestinians in Gaza with antisemitism.

Witnesses at the latest hearing included David Banks, chancellor of New York City Public Schools, Karla Silvestre, president of the Montgomery County Board of Education in Maryland, and Enikia Ford Morthel, superintendent of the Berkeley Unified School District in California.

Wednesday’s degrading spectacle was the latest in a series of public witch-hunts led by the Republicans, with support from the Democrats. In order to block the development of a mass movement against war and its source, the capitalist system, the Republicans and Democrats are throwing down the ideological gauntlet to school administrators, teachers and presidents: Those who refuse to toe the US/Israeli line will be slandered, investigated and terminated.

The hearings on Capitol Hill, which began after Israel launched its war of annihilation on Gaza following the October 7, 2023, Hamas raid, have nothing to do with combating antisemitism and everything to do with intimidating, isolating and crushing anti-war resistance among students, youth and workers.

The Republican-led committee is dominated by far-right representatives who have pledged their fealty to Donald Trump, an admirer of Adolf Hitler and promoter of the antisemitic and anti-immigrant “Great Replacement Theory.”

Wednesday’s hearing marked a qualitative development in the US government crackdown on the democratic rights of the working class. It was the first hearing that featured as witnesses K-12 public school officials.

It was chaired by Florida Rep. Aaron P. Bean. Like virtually every Republican, Bean promotes the “Great Replacement Theory,” a fascist conspiracy theory that claims rich Jewish people and organizations, and their Democratic Party allies, are systematically importing non-white people into the United States in order to rig elections against Republicans (“real Americans”) and subjugate white Christians.

On May 3, less than a week before the hearing was held, Rep. Bean tweeted that New York Senator Chuck Schumer, the highest-ranking Jewish official in Congress, was refusing to stop the “border invasion... by design.”

Two weeks prior, on April 17, Bean tweeted that Department of

Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas, who is also Jewish, “supports the border invasion.”

The day before, on April 16, Bean wrote on Twitter:

I voted twice to impeach Secretary Mayorkas, not once, but TWICE. It’s time for the Senate to hold a trial, render a verdict, and hold Sec. Mayorkas accountable for his role in the border invasion.

Bean has tweeted about the “border invasion” and “criminal aliens” over a half-dozen times since the start of the year.

All the witnesses for Wednesday’s hearing were drawn from more liberal districts, to help Republicans portray antisemitism as a “left-wing” problem. In reality, antisemitism is a hallmark of the fascist right, which is why neo-Nazis like Nick Fuentes and Kanye West are welcomed in the Republican Party and at Trump’s dinner table.

Seeking to placate the right-wing politicians, the school officials touted their commitment to stamping out anti-Israel sentiment. In his opening statement, Banks emphasized that he was a former “school safety officer,” and that he was appointed to his current position by former New York police officer and current Mayor Eric Adams.

“Mayor Adams condemned and I condemned the heinous acts of Hamas,” Banks assured the committee, adding:

We have removed, disciplined or are in the process of disciplining at least a dozen staff and school leaders, including removing a principal in the middle of a school year. We have suspended at least 30 students, we have involved the NYPD...

Banks also noted that the district was working with several pro-Zionist Jewish organizations, including the Anti-Defamation League, which has spearheaded, along with the Biden White House, the campaign to equate opposition to Israel with antisemitism.

Bean opened the hearing by asking every school official if Israel had the “right to exist as a Jewish state.” Every witness answered “Yes.” Bean then asked, “‘From the River to the Sea, Palestine will be Free,’ is that antisemitic?”

Banks, the head of the New York public schools, responded that “most Jewish people” would agree that it is, “and as such, it is not allowed in our schools... I would say it’s antisemitic.”

Silvestre and Ford Morthel included a caveat, but likewise agreed that

the phrase was antisemitic. All the officials agreed with the sentence: “‘ Hamas’ actions on October 7 were a terrorist attack.”

Wednesday’s hearing underscored the terror within the ruling class of the potential for the anti-genocide encampments, walkouts and protests at college campuses across the US and internationally to spread further and link up with workers.

Unable to justify its war crimes, the ruling class seeks to deflect and slander anti-war opposition and suppress the democratic rights of students and workers.

Despite massive police repression and threats of expulsion, students throughout the United States and internationally continue to protest the genocide in Gaza, including through the establishment of encampments on universities. On Wednesday, Jake, a history student at Cal State-Los Angeles and participant in the Gaza solidarity encampment launched at the school on May 1, spoke with this author.

Asked to comment on the claim that opposition to genocide against the Palestinians is “antisemitic,” Jake replied:

It’s the classic strategy of trying to tie all criticism of Israel to antisemitism, to delegitimize it.

This has always been the goal of Zionist organizations, who want to delegitimize any sort of criticism, including by Jews who criticize Israel. It’s all pretty disgusting, but that’s its own uniquely kind of disgusting form of smearing criticism of Zionism and of Israel. We’re not antisemitic, of course.

I would just like to reiterate that we have a problem with Israel because of its nature as a settler colonial state and because of the genocide that is currently perpetrated. We would have a problem with any genocide going on right now.

Reflecting on the bipartisan campaign to smear anti-genocide protesters, Jake added:

Democrats for a long time have basically had, on both foreign policy and domestic economic policy, essentially identical opinions to Republicans. They have no problem with Israel, and no problem with Zionism, or just imperialism in general. We saw that as far back as the Iraq War. Tons of Democrats voted for the Iraq war and supported it.

Jake explained that, like other encampments established at over 120 universities throughout the world in the last three weeks, the Cal State LA encampment was demanding that the university cut financial ties to Israel. He said:

We want our school to do that.

We want to engage in a full academic boycott of any partnership with institutions, universities, and organizations that invest in, support and legitimize the Zionist regime of Israel.

Even beyond the fiscal situation of a lot of students, which is, I think—maybe dire is the wrong word, but uniquely precarious for a lot of Cal State LA students. We have a very high working class population in the student body, as well as a very high non-white population in the student body...

The continued funding for Israel and genocide is the focus of a lot of these universities, or at least, a higher priority than their

students. At Cal State LA, one of our buildings where classes are held, King Hall, was discovered at the beginning of the semester to have asbestos in it. And since then, it has been discovered it also has mold and lead in it.

So a university certainly should be spending the money on that, on fixing that, rather than on genocide. And the fact that they haven’t, really shows that they don’t care about their students as much as they should, at least.

Jake said that since the encampment was established last week, “A lot of people” have “come by to support us,” including teachers with Faculty for Justice in Palestine.

Asked to comment on the role of the police in suppressing encampments, including over 2,500 arrests in the last three weeks, Jake observed:

The police exist to maintain the current order, right? In the United States they continue to partnership with Israel, the LAPD, and I believe a lot of other police departments around the United States, are actually trained by the IDF... So it makes a lot of sense that they are the ones suppressing these protests.

He continued:

It’s very exciting to see strikes and industrial labor action. It is something that can actually make a difference aside from voting the political parties.

I believe definitely there needs to be more action. I’m a history student. Over the course of the 20th century, a lot of that radicalism was drained away from the trade unions, in large part due to violent suppression from the government and from capital.

So the labor unions that remain are the ones who are inoffensive to the government, and that means that they are not organizations that can necessarily be trusted in a moment like this when we need to make decisions that are against the dictates of capital and against the interests of the American government.

I do appreciate that rank and file workers in these unions do support Palestine and want action from their unions. But I think similarly to how we feel about Joe Biden’s politics, I think that the rank-and-file members need to take things into their own hands in order to force that.



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