

Texas State University labor historian fired for political speech

Trévon Austin
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On September 10, a Texas State University professor was fired after having been accused by a far-right provocateur of inciting violence in a video posted on social media of the professor speaking at a socialism conference.

Tom Alter, an associate professor in the History Department at Texas State University in San Marcos, was fired for his comments during an online political meeting that took place on September 7. Alter's remarks at the Revolutionary Socialism Conference, a meeting organized by various socialist groups, were secretly recorded by an unknown attendee and subsequently uploaded to social media.

Alter is a serious historian whose scholarly focus includes transnational approaches to race, labor, capitalism and protest movements. Some of his works include the essay "The Role of Independent Working-Class Political Action" and his recently published book *Toward a Cooperative Commonwealth: The Transplanted Roots of Farmer-Labor Radicalism in Texas*. In the latter, Alter reckons with the influence radical German migrants fleeing from the backlash of the 1848 revolutions had upon the burgeoning farmer-labor bloc in Texas, challenging the notion that Texas is a state home only to reactionary politics and history.

In a post on Elon Musk's X by Karlyn Borysenko, a prolific peddler of fascist misinformation, Alter's remarks are edited and misrepresented to suggest that the professor was calling for a violent "overthrow of the 'bloodthirsty' US Government." According to the student newspaper at Texas State, Alter was soon fired without any chance to respond, give his version of events or defend himself against the accusations.

Alter attended the event as a private citizen exercising his democratic rights. He never introduced himself as being associated with Texas State University through his attendance, or spoke on behalf of the university.

Borysenko's video cuts a portion full of Alter's in half, showing him denouncing the methods of "insurrectional anarchists" as insufficient in building an organized working class movement capable of leading the working class to power. Alter then asks: "Without organization, how can anyone expect to overthrow the most bloodthirsty profit-driven, mad organization in the history of the world—that of the US government?"

Such remarks are nothing new in the history of the working class movement and Alter, as a historian specializing in the labor movement, has written on the topic in many of his academic works. Far from an open call to violence, Alter merely posed the question of organized action, a long-espoused tenet of workers' struggles.

In a statement, Texas State University President Kelly Damphousse announced that Alter was fired after the university was made aware of comments that Damphousse said constituted "serious professional and personal misconduct." Nowhere in the statement did Damphousse specify what comments Alter made in his 18-minute speech that violated university policy, nor did Damphousse acknowledge that Alter attended the event without identifying himself with the institution, the proper and professional course.

"Conduct that advocates for inciting violence is directly contrary to the values of Texas State University," Damphousse said. "I cannot and will not tolerate such behavior."

Texas State University System Chancellor Brian McCall commended Alter's firing in a post on X, while specifically pointing to Alter's comment about workers' seizure of power against capitalist rule as misconduct.

"Video recordings made public this week in which a Texas State University professor advocated for the overthrow of our government are inconsistent with our shared values and demonstrate egregious personal and

professional misconduct,” McCall said in the statement.

Alter’s firing came before the ongoing fascistic witch-hunt targeting anyone critical of the late Charlie Kirk—whose political record was one of racism, anti-immigrant bigotry, Christian fundamentalism, and hostility to democratic rights—but cannot be separated from it. Alter is a victim of the war being waged against democratic rights by Donald Trump and the ruling elite, who are hostile to any mobilization of the working class. These forces want to silence Alter not so much for his remarks as for his work as a historian, which aims to enlighten Texas workers about their progressive history.

Trump and the oligarchy he serves have targeted many universities and individual scholars as part of a coordinated assault on democratic rights, in line with their drive to police state dictatorship. This includes Columbia University, which has had about \$400 million in federal funding cut and has been pressured to make policy changes in line with US support for the genocidal Israeli regime. It also includes last year’s firing of a Pennsylvania professor for her opposition to the Gaza genocide. On Sunday, Trump suggested that he would begin using federal resources to attack his political adversaries, when asked if he would investigate critics on the left after Kirk’s death.

“They’re already under major investigation, a lot of the people that you would traditionally say are on the left,” Trump told reporters.

Notwithstanding any political differences with Alter, the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party (US) condemn his dismissal in the strongest terms. Alter must be immediately reinstated to his position and an investigation launched into the administrators behind such a flagrant violation of democratic rights. A petition demanding Alter’s reinstatement states plainly that this cannot be treated as an isolated incident:

Dr. Alter’s firing is not just an attack on one professor. It is an attack on all Texans’ rights to speak freely without fear of retaliation. Public institutions cannot allow online provocateurs or political actors to dictate who can or cannot express lawful views without losing their livelihood. Kelly Damphousse should not take orders from a YouTuber.

Alter, esteemed in his field, has also received support from fellow historians. In a statement shared with the WSWS, Gregg Andrews, distinguished professor emeritus of history at Texas State University, expressed his opposition to the university’s decision:

I am deeply disturbed by the abrupt firing of Tom Alter, whose scholarship, teaching, and professionalism have been hallmarks of excellence on the campus of Texas State University as well as the wider History profession and academic world. As the director of his Masters of Arts thesis (2008) and as an outside member of his doctoral dissertation committee, I have known Tom for more than twenty years. His peer-reviewed scholarship, rooted in multiple layers of transnational research and primary sources, is impeccable and highly respected in the profession. Tom is popular among students, who are now left in the academic lurch. His firing, a bitter expression of today’s highly charged, repressive political climate, has dealt a crushing blow to students and the process by which we study, debate, write, and understand history.

The working class cannot be silent in the face of escalating attacks on academic freedom and democratic rights. Workers and students in Texas and beyond must vigorously take up the demand to reinstate Alter and mobilize against the repressive policies of the Trump administration.

The defense of Professor Alter and others targeted by reaction must be taken up by the working class, the only social force capable of stopping the descent into world war, genocide and fascist dictatorship.



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