“There's a long history of working class resistance in Texas”

Interview with Prof. Tom Alter, fired by Texas State for political speech

Tom Mackaman
4 November 2025

Professor Thomas Alter was first fired by Texas State University on September 10, 2025 for remarks made at a socialist conference. After a brief court-ordered reinstatement, the university upheld and finalized his dismissal on October 13, 2025. Both actions were taken without due process. Alter is a historian of Texas and of labor and the working class. In this interview he is speaking in a personal capacity.

TM: Can you tell us something about your career as a historian, your research interests, and how you became interested in the things that you study?

TA: My interest in labor history and working class-based social movements goes back a few decades. I started as an undergraduate history major at Indiana University in the early and mid-90s. I was radicalized by a lot of the things going on in the labor movement at the time. This was when the Caterpillar workers were on strike, and also the United Rubber Workers on strike at Bridgestone-Firestone and the A.E. Staley lockout. And I learned how many people within our own class, the working class, didn't know our own history. That was part of my motivation to start doing research on working class history.

I was living in Austin, Texas starting in 2000, and then I entered the master's history program at Texas State University in 2005. Through faculty like Gregg Andrews and Vicki Bynum, I was able to get into Texas working class history projects. That became the origins of my book, *Toward a Cooperative Commonwealth*. At the time, outside of James Green's fantastic book, *Grass-Roots Socialism* from 1978, there wasn't much out there. Now, other historians have done good work, but I found a lack of Texas working class history, and I was drawn to uncover this history that’s just sitting there waiting to be told.

TM: Are you a native Texan, or did you wind up there in graduate school?

TA: I have a mixed Indiana and Texas background. My family is originally from Fort Wayne, Indiana, a very industrial, working class city. In 1986, when I was 12, my family moved to Houston. So that shaped me. I’ve had this mixed back-and-forth between Indiana and Texas, with a few other places like Chicago and Minneapolis sprinkled in.

TM: Tell us about your career at Texas State University.

TA: I got my master’s at Texas State in 2008. It’s a terminal master’s program, so I went to the University of Illinois at Chicago for my PhD. I was on the job market and got a lecturer position at Texas State in the fall of 2017. I enjoyed my time there as a graduate student and liked the faculty. While I was a lecturer, a tenure track position in Texas history came up.

Based largely on my book being under contract and my exemplary teaching record, I got the tenure track position. In many ways, it was a dream job. I like being in Central Texas, and Texas State is a majority minority university with a lot of first generation college students and students from working class backgrounds. Those are the students I wanted to teach.

I passed all my teaching evaluations. Until you get tenure, a senior faculty member reviews your teaching every semester. My student evaluations were positive. I was fulfilling service to the university. I was supervising five graduate students' master’s theses... because students were attracted to labor history. I had met my service and teaching obligations, and my contributions to the field with articles, book reviews, and my book. I had a spotless record with no complaints from students about indoctrination. And I’ve even had conservative students tell me they appreciate my unbiased presentation of history.

I wanted my classrooms to be unbiased; let’s teach the history. As a Marxist, you don’t need to make things up about US history; you stick with the facts. There’s a lot of tragedy, but also a lot of triumph, like the labor movement, the civil rights movement, the women’s rights movement. I wasn’t teaching students to hate America, and no students complained of that.

TM: The administration doesn’t seem to have given any consideration to the damage inflicted on students when a professor is effectively disappeared from the classroom in the middle of the semester. What’s going on with your students and graduate students now?

TA: It’s been very derailing for some of my graduate students to have their advisor just disappear. I was cut off from my Texas State email and removed from the classroom without due process. It was sudden and immediate, not a years-long process. I had students looking to graduate this semester. Some found other capable faculty to step in, but it’s been very disruptive. The graduate seminar I was teaching had to be completely redone two weeks into the semester. It’s been jarring to the students’ learning experiences.

TM: What the Texas State administration has done brings to mind some of the most shameful chapters in American history—like the McCarthy period and the Red Scare—but maybe it’s more similar to the Third Reich, where professors are just taken out of their classrooms.

TA: Yes, McCarthyism has come up. But this echoes fascist Italy in the 1920s and the beginnings of the Third Reich, the purging of universities of Marxist and leftist professors. In the McCarthy era, there was usually some type of process, even if it was a sham kangaroo court. Here, I was dismissed. There was a court-ordered reinstatement, but then the process Texas State went through was a hearing with the president, Kelly Damphousse, where the judge and prosecutor were one and the same, not following 85 years of established academic norms set up by the AAUP (American Association of University Professors) since 1940. That’s just been completely abolished.

TM: One thing that makes your case distinctive is that you are a historian of labor and the working class. In effect, the university is

censoring this subject. So I think a particular value in speaking to you is to talk about what they don't want students to hear anymore. And so I want to talk about Texas working class history.

It's a state with a unique history because of its vastness; it's a southern state, a plains state, and western state, and it's the state that is arguably most tied to Mexico and Latin America. On top of all of that, Texas has a huge and diverse working class. Tell us about Texas. I think it's misportrayed by both the right wing and the liberal media, which tends to blame the working class people of Texas for the state's reactionary politics.

TA: Texas is an amazing place. When I leave, people say they feel sorry for me, but I love it, minus the present government. I fell in love with it when I was 12 and my family moved to Houston, which is one of the most diverse cities in the entire country.

Texas is a transnational space and has been for a very long time. As you say, it's a southern state, a western state, a plains state, with ties to Mexico. With Houston, you have ties to the world, a large and diverse Asian population. There's so much to learn from. That's what makes Texas such an interesting and politically important place. Size alone makes it important, but also the different sections of the working class. And then there are the elites. With cotton and then oil, two drivers of capitalist wealth accumulation, the Texas political and economic elites have wielded a lot of influence.

TM: And again when we turn to its history, Texas is more complicated than the stereotype. There was, for example, opposition to the Confederacy in Texas, as elsewhere in the South—as Victoria Bynum has shown for Mississippi and other historians have for eastern Tennessee and other areas. And in Texas this opposition seems to be concentrated among the German immigrants, the 48ers, which is a central concern of your book.

TA: There was a trickle of German immigration beginning in the 1830s and 1840s. After the counter-revolution against the 1848 revolution, many politically minded German refugees settled in Texas. While many settled in the Midwest--Chicago, St. Louis, Milwaukee, and Cincinnati--about 30,000 came to Texas, seeking to build a new life where they could maintain their German culture and political beliefs. They weren't utopian socialists, but they sought to put their beliefs into practice. They underestimated how entrenched the slavocracy was and the lengths slave owners would go to defend slavery. And so they went from the Prussian reactionary monarchy to confronting the slavocracy in Texas.

There was resistance, a bushwhack war, guerrilla warfare in the hill country. There was the Nueces Massacre, where German immigrants trying to get to Mexico to hook up with the Union Army were ambushed by Confederates and slaughtered. And there's also a history of socialism. Adolph Douai is credited as one of the first to bring Marxist socialism to the United States. He was an abolitionist, who started an anti-slavery newspaper in San Antonio but had to leave after a few years.

There was resistance, which is why Texas was different. The state had a referendum on whether to join the Confederacy. It wasn't a fair election, with violence and intimidation, but the fact that they had a referendum shows the sentiment against it. The German counties in Central Texas and Anglo farmers in North Texas along the Red River, who were not slave owners, voted against it. So, there's a long history of resistance in Texas.

TM: And the Texas slavocracy's reaction against the Germans shows that this anti-immigrant politics isn't new to the ruling class, either. That allows a segue into the relationship with Mexico and Latin America. Could you say something about the complicated border and the relationship with people of Mexican and Latin American ancestry, a crucially important part of the working class in Texas?

TA: Neither Mexico nor Spain truly controlled Texas; it was very much Indian territory, particularly Comanche territory. In the early 19th century, there were about 40,000 Native peoples and only about 2,500 Spanish and then Mexican settlers. You had Tejano elites and a Mexican working class. Some Tejano elites, trying to figure out how to enrich themselves and settle the land further, worked with Anglo settlers to bring slavery into Texas. This put free labor in a tough position, competing against slave labor.

You had some Tejano elites in Texas encouraging US southerners to bring slavery, but also people in Mexico who wanted nothing to do with it. Mexico was influenced by the Enlightenment and saw slavery as contradictory to ideas of freedom and liberty. That conflict became part of the Texas independence struggle.

Someone has said, and I believe it's true, that the Republic of Texas was the first slave owners' republic because it specifically entrenched slavery, whereas the US Constitution was more iffy on it. The Republic of Texas was very clear: slavery was enshrined in it. The Anglo settlers wanted more representation, but it was in a white supremacist, Anglo framework. It was bourgeois freedom and democracy for Anglo elites, not for the working class and definitely not for ending slavery.

TM: Could you say something about Albert and Lucy Parsons, two Texans who are important figures in the history of the American working class?

TA: The Parsons were in many ways representative of the Texas working class. Albert Parsons was from Alabama, ended up in Waco, got swept up in Confederate patriotism, saw the realities of war, and came back advocating for freedmen's rights through a newspaper. He fell in love with Lucy Parsons, a person of African American and Mexican ancestry. They championed black rights.

After Reconstruction ended sooner in Texas, they went to Chicago, saw the labor struggles there, and radicalized further into anarchists after seeing the state shoot workers in the street. They embodied the diversity of Texas, the legacies of conquest, slavery, the Confederacy, and working class resistance to those events. They left Texas largely due to their interracial marriage making them a target. It was old 48er German networks that got them from Texas to Chicago.

You see that spirit in Texas. There's a spirit of independence, that old populism. Texas was the heart of independent populism, not fused with the Democratic Party like in the Midwest. You still see that independent populist streak. What you see in Texas politics is this struggle over who can tap into that populist streak and anger.

Economics sits at the heart of populism; it was poor landowning farmers losing their land and becoming tenant farmers, seeing that Wall Street, railroads and middlemen were cheating them. They saw clearly that they were producing the wealth but others were gaining it. Now, the Republican Party, especially under Trump, has been able to capture that populist angst and spirit of independence.

Teaching Texas history becomes a political battleground over whether you teach the heroic Anglo-Texan white supremacist narrative or the actual history. I just teach the actual history, warts, triumphs and tragedies. That becomes a threat because you ask where that populist anger actually comes from, and it goes back to the German 48ers, the Greenback Labor Party, the People's Party and the Knights of Labor. The rise and fall of the Knights of Labor, the largest labor organization of the 1800s, has Texas roots.

Teaching these basic facts tears down that heroic Anglo narrative. There is something unique about Texas history, but it's not just "Remember the Alamo." There's a true history of working class resistance and independent political action. The People's Party was flawed, but many Texas populists transitioned to the Socialist Party. There is a true spirit of working class political independence here, and that's what they're trying to repress. They don't want that history taught because it could become an example with lessons for working class people on ways to resist.

TM: As opposed to many labor historians, you take a more critical view of the New Deal and its role in bringing an end to this fascinating history

of resistance. What is your take on Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal, and how is it different from the standard narrative?

TA: The standard narrative is that Franklin Roosevelt saved the working class through New Deal reforms, giving them the right to unionize, the NLRB (National Labor Relations Board), Social Security and the minimum wage. I have a different take. I argue that there was a farmer-labor bloc, a continuity of independent working class parties and organizations from the 1870s to the 1920s. The presence of these parties—the Greenback Labor Party, the People's Party, the Socialist Party—is what put pressure on the Democrats and Republicans to enact reforms in the Progressive Era and the New Deal. Eugene Debs getting six per cent of the vote in close elections meant they had to make inroads. In the absence of this independent political action, we haven't seen any true major economic reforms since. Roosevelt was saving capitalism, as he made clear.

The National Labor Relations Board was actually a setback for the working class. Before, the working class was contesting for power directly through strikes and parties. With the NLRB, the state becomes an arbiter. And in a capitalist state, it's not neutral. Instead of settling disputes on the picket line, where the working class has power by withholding labor, it gets caught up in NLRB elections.

Many veterans of the farmer-labor struggles in Texas hoped to capture the Democratic Party, but they failed, lost their political independence, and hence the working class lost a lot. Since then, we haven't had major economic reforms. So I don't see the New Deal as a great celebratory thing; in many ways, it demobilized the working class, especially the sense of independent political action, which had a long tradition in the US.

TM: That brings us to the evolution of Texas politics since then. Texas didn't always have the most reactionary politicians. It could produce reformist figures like Ralph Yarborough, and you had Fred Harris in neighboring Oklahoma. And even Johnson presented himself as a New Deal-style reformist politician.

But now you have a political class that seems to have lost its mind. What it really represents are the 80-some billionaires in Texas who hoard wealth of $800 billion. Of course, the whole American ruling class is racing to the right at breakneck speed. But Texas seems to be the pace setter.

TA: The standard history points to Johnson signing the Civil Rights Act and saying as an aside to an aide that he had just handed the South to the Republican Party. But there's a longer history of conservative Democratic opposition to labor and civil rights. Then the Republicans were able to manipulate that independent Texas streak.

The Democrats were the establishment in a one-party state. The new oil and aerospace money, playing up anti-establishment politics, allowed the Republicans to tap into the populist streak. They positioned themselves as opposition to Washington bureaucrats. The language of "right to work" sounds good, but it was anti-civil rights and anti-union. They were able to play on that. There were banking scandals in the 1970s involving Democratic politicians, and Republicans were able to come in as outsiders against corrupt politicians, even though they were the wealthy elites. Many Republicans, like Rick Perry, were originally Democrats because that was the party in charge, and they rebranded once things shifted.

TM: Thank you for speaking with us. Before we end, can you give us an update on your case and where things stand and what people who read this can do to help.

TA: Right now, the main thing is a campaign aimed at the Texas State Board of Regents, who are hearing an appeal for my reinstatement. There is a subcommittee meeting on November 10 in Austin, and then the full board is meeting on November 20 and 21 in Huntsville. People are asked to send emails to the Board either as an academic or part of the general public through an Action Network email campaign.