

Texas university board upholds firing of labor historian Tom Alter

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On Thursday, the governing body of the Texas State University (TSU) system voted to uphold the firing of historian Thomas Alter, who was removed from his position as a professor at TSU's San Marcos campus in September for political speech. Alter, who has been battling his dismissal in court and via administrative processes, had appealed to the Texas Board of Regents to overturn the action of his college's president, Kelly Damphousse.

The Board of Regents, all appointees of far-right Governor Greg Abbott, released a single-line statement this week, declaring,

After a thorough review of the facts, as well as information provided during Dr. Thomas Alter's due process hearing, the Board of Regents has voted unanimously to uphold President Damphousse's decision to summarily dismiss Dr. Alter and revoke his tenure.

The firing of Alter is an attack on free speech. It sets a precedent for the systematic dismantling of democratic rights on the campuses and the initiation of a purge at universities of all those who do not subscribe to the fascist ideology pushed by the Republican Party.

Alter, an accomplished researcher and educator who specializes in Texas labor history, was dismissed because of remarks he made at a conference on socialism in which he criticized capitalism and its blood-thirsty nature and expressed his support for the building of mass opposition. The historian's remarks were surreptitiously recorded by far-right provocateur and Hitler apologist Karlyn Borysenko, who has made it her life's work to destroy the lives of left-wing critics

of capitalism and fascism.

TSU President Damphousse, rushing to meet the demands of an orchestrated right-wing campaign and wishing to make an example of Alter, seized on the historian's comments as a private citizen to claim that he was fomenting violence on campus. Alter's views, Damphousse declared in an October 13 letter, "implicate Texas State, its students and employees, and safety on campus during a time when tensions on campuses across the country, including at Texas State, are high."

In fact, as the university leader's explanation for the firing suggests, Alter was targeted out of fear that his work on the history of Texas workers' and farmers' struggles and his factual description of American capitalism would connect with the sentiments of students and university workers who increasingly hate the violence and depravity of the profit system.

Even in Texas, one of the geographical centers of American far-right politics, top Republican officials are rapidly losing support. According to the Texas Politics Project at the state's public university in Austin, approval ratings for President Trump and Governor Abbott both now hover around 40 percent, a fall for each of about 14 to 15 percentage points from December of last year.

The Texas Board of Regents' decision comes as no surprise. The body is stacked with Republican donors. A 2022 *Texas Tribune* article noted that two-thirds of those serving on state public university boards are financial backers of Governor Abbott. Available records show that for years regents Charlie Amato, Russell Gordy, Earl Austin, Jr., and William Scott have all poured money into Republican causes nationwide. Every individual on the board is a capitalist, collectively representing interests from the oil and gas,

real estate, finance, banking, logistics, energy infrastructure industries. Not one is an educator, a researcher, or a scientist.

The political and social character of the Board of Regents makes clear the absurdity of the appeal issued by Aimee Villarreal, president of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) at TSU, at a rally in support of Alter the same day that the board made its decision. “The regents have the power to stop this unraveling, to restore order, to restore trust, and to protect the integrity of this institution and to all state employees,” Villarreal said.

There was never any prospect that the Board of Regents would do anything of the sort. What is required is not appeals to Abbott’s far-right political cronies, but the mobilization of students and workers against Abbott, the Board of Regents, Damphousse, and all attacks against higher education. This is the position of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IY SSE).

The permanent firing of Professor Alter is only the latest move in a series of attacks on democratic rights at Texas universities. In just the last two months, “racial and gender” ideology have been banned at Texas A&M university, a dean and department chair were fired at the same campus for referencing gender in a children’s literature course, and “audits” have been undertaken of gender courses at dozens of public universities in an effort to root out “LGBTQ ideology.”

Regardless of whatever statements local Democratic Party politicians may make in support of Alter, they will do nothing to stop the attacks on higher education.

The Democratic Party in fact created the conditions that have allowed for Alter’s firing, as well as other attacks on freedom of speech and academic freedom now underway on the campuses. Under the Biden administration, anti-genocide demonstrations were shut down and protesters arrested at university campuses in Texas and across the US. Students were subjected to internal university investigations and disciplinary hearings, forced to grovel before administrators in order to remain on campus, or were simply suspended—and often denied their degrees. At Muhlenberg College in Pennsylvania, anthropologist Maura Finkelstein was fired for making public statements against the mass murder of Palestinians after the Biden administration initiated a “civil rights” investigation against her.

The eruption of fascist politics at the heights of US society emerges from the ruling elite’s desperate effort to preserve a capitalist system that can no longer tolerate any economic or political concessions to masses of ordinary people. The endless extraction of profit from the bottom 90 percent of humanity must now be secured by violence and by silencing opposition, such as that voiced by Alter.

There is broad support for Alter at Texas State University and elsewhere. Students speak openly in his defense. Thousands of dollars have been raised for his legal campaign and fund to support his family. There is a widely held sense that something really dangerous is at work in his firing. Such sentiments have to be mobilized in political struggle.



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