

Jailed 37 days for a Charlie Kirk meme: Tennessee man's settlement exposes the fraud of Trump's "Anti-Weaponization" Fund

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On May 20, Perry County, Tennessee agreed to pay \$835,000 to Larry Bushart, a 61-year-old retired law enforcement officer, to settle a federal civil-rights lawsuit alleging that his arrest and 37-day detention over a Facebook meme critical of Donald Trump and Charlie Kirk violated his constitutional rights.

Bushart was arrested on September 21, 2025 on a felony charge of threatening mass violence at a school, after he shared a string of political memes beneath a Facebook post advertising a Charlie Kirk memorial vigil in Perry County.

One meme quoted Donald Trump's own words after the January 2024 school shooting at Perry High School in Perry, Iowa, "We have to get over this." Bushart added, "This seems relevant today...." The meme had been circulating widely online before Bushart shared it.

The meme did nothing more than hold Donald Trump's own words up to a mirror. "We have to get over this," was Trump's cold, offhand dismissal of children shot dead in Perry, Iowa. The internet meme became a pointed observation about whose deaths are mourned and whose are not. The "Perry" referred to was in Iowa, not Tennessee, and there was no threat, implicit or explicit, to the local schools.

When dispatched a Lexington police officer to Bushart's home on September 21, the body-camera footage of that encounter tells its own story.

The officer arrived with no clear understanding of why he had been sent. "I have really no idea what they are talking about," the officer told Bushart. "They wanted me to come make contact with you and let you know that they may be in contact with you... I don't know exactly what they are referring to."

Bushart needed no clarification. "Oh, I do," he said. "Charlie Kirk."

When the officer relayed that Perry County believed the posts were "insinuating violence," Bushart was unequivocal: "No, it wasn't. I'm not going to take it down. Go look." The officer shrugged: "I don't care. This ain't got nothing to do with me."

Bushart was charged with posing a threat of mass violence on school property. The arrest-warrant affidavit, signed by investigator Jason Morrow, claimed a reasonable person could conclude the image could lead to serious bodily injury or death.

Sheriff Weems later admitted to local news that his agency would not have charged Bushart if he had simply agreed to remove the post. In the sheriff's own words: "He admitted to making the post and advised that he was not taking it down. So, therefore, he was showing the intent."

The charge of threatening mass violence at a school thus followed directly from Bushart's refusal to delete constitutionally protected political speech, not from any credible evidence of a threat.

The charge was dropped on October 29, the day after NewsChannel 5 Investigates aired body-camera footage and an interview with Weems in which he admitted investigators had known all along the meme was not about Perry County, but only after Bushart had spent 37 days behind bars, unable to meet the \$2 million bail.

During his detention, Bushart lost his post-retirement medical transportation job, he missed the birth of his granddaughter and his wedding anniversary.

Bushart's six-figure settlement is a significant, if partial, vindication. But its full significance only comes

into focus when set against the Trump administration's creation of its so-called "Anti-Weaponization Fund," a \$1.776 billion presidential slush fund ostensibly designed to compensate Americans whose rights were violated by politically motivated government prosecution.

While Perry County was writing Bushart's settlement check, the White House was constructing a billion-dollar patronage apparatus to compensate the January 6 attackers, Republican political operatives, and the lawyers who sought to overturn the 2020 election on the basis that they were victims of politically motivated prosecution. They were not.

Bushart, a retiree working part-time as a medical driver, shared a meme on social media. The January 6 attackers stormed the Capitol, beat police officers, and attempted to overturn a democratic election, conduct that in any functioning democracy would result in exactly the prosecution they received. They are the Trump fascist movement's ground troops, being financially rewarded for services rendered and resourced for future deployment against the working class.

The Anti-Weaponization Fund is not an anomaly. The language of rights, free speech, due process and protection from state persecution is being selectively deployed in the service of the ruling class which is suppressing its opponents, and now turning to openly authoritarian methods.

Tennessee's Charlie Kirk Act, now awaiting the governor's signature, makes that principle permanent and institutional. Recently passed by the Republican-controlled legislature, the law forbids public universities from disinviting speakers in response to threatened protests, restricts protesters from disrupting invited speakers, and mandates adoption of "institutional neutrality" policies modeled on the University of Chicago's 1967 Kalven Report which was written at the height of Vietnam-era campus unrest.

The principle has been a useful tool for administrators ever since. It was most recently deployed against students protesting the Gaza genocide, when chancellors across the country invoked institutional neutrality to justify refusing to take any position on the mass killing of civilians while simultaneously calling police on the students demanding they do so.

The Charlie Kirk Act also creates litigation

mechanisms that right-wing organizations can use to sue universities into preemptive compliance. What Weems did to Bushart with a warrant, the Charlie Kirk Act does to Tennessee's campuses with a lawsuit.

The same legislature's Charlie Kirk American Heritage Act requires public universities to teach the positive influence of Judeo-Christian religion on American history. Taken together, these laws expose "institutional neutrality" for what it has always been: a class principle, invoked against the opponents of the ruling class and discarded when the ruling class advances its own politics.

Bushart's settlement was won despite this apparatus, not because of any principle it embodies. The liberal framing, "the system works," "free speech prevailed" must be rejected. Bushart fought for months through a civil rights organization and a federal lawsuit to vindicate rights that were revoked by the deliberate exercise of state power on the personal authority of a sheriff who already knew, before signing the warrant, that no crime had been committed. That is not a functioning democracy. It is a political system in which every institution is compromised, one that can only be challenged through the independent political mobilization of the working class against the capitalist oligarchy that controls it.



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