

University of Illinois student newspaper publishes anti-Muslim cartoons

Students for Social Equality holding public meeting on controversy

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On Thursday, February 9, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign student newspaper, the *Daily Illini*, became the first college paper in the United States to print the inflammatory cartoons of the Muslim prophet originally published in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*. The cartoon's publication in Champaign-Urbana and the manner in which they were published has touched off protest and great controversy on campus.

The chief editor of the *Daily Illini*, Acton Gorton, and the newspaper's opinions editor Chuck Prochaska, who is well known for his right-wing views, decided to publish six of the cartoons behind the backs of the newspaper's opinions board, which according to normal procedure collectively selects cartoons and editorials.

The two have been suspended for two weeks while the *Daily Illini*—which is owned by a private holding company, not the university—conducts an internal investigation. The decision by the newspaper's non-student management to investigate followed a virtual revolt by a significant number of the *Daily Illini*'s student employees who accused Gorton and Prochaska of surreptitiously publishing the cartoons.

Like their counterparts around the US and in Europe, the two *Daily Illini* editors have offered the bogus claim that, by choosing to print the cartoons, they acted to defend free speech. But their disregard for democratic procedures of their own editorial board underscores that their publication was a provocation, pure and simple. The cartoons were accompanied by no critical commentary, thus tacitly lending the newspaper's seal of approval to their racist content.

Urbana-Champaign is home to a significant Arab and

Muslim population, much of which is connected to the university. These and other university students and workers were revolted and angered by the publication of the cartoons.

A campus protest after the cartoons' publication attracted between 200 and 300 students on February 13. Numerous students, most of whom were Muslim, spoke. The theme of the rally was "No to Hate Speech." Regrettably the speakers largely confined themselves to denouncing the cartoons as insensitive and speaking in defense of the Islamic religion. They offered little or no historical or political context to the controversy. When this writer asked to address the rally I was denied, with one of the organizers suggesting that it was inappropriate to discuss "politics."

Supporters of the Students for Social Equality distributed fliers announcing a public meeting to be held on the campus on Wednesday, February 22, and statements of the *World Socialist Web Site* Editorial Board. These were eagerly received by those attending the rally, and many students expressed gratitude that a non-religious organization had intervened to denounce the publication of the cartoons and draw its connection to both the anti-immigrant chauvinism being whipped up by right-wing parties in Europe as well as the Bush administration's "war on terrorism."

As if to demonstrate the thoroughly antidemocratic and racist intentions of those who defend the cartoon's publication, two representatives of a right-wing, pro-Republican student newspaper generously funded by the ultra-right Scaife Foundation showed up at the rally in an attempt to disrupt it. They stood behind the speakers and hurled crude epithets against Islam and the Muslim prophet, but were drowned out by the far

larger numbers of those protesting the cartoons.

Numerous letters, most decidedly opposed to the cartoon's publication, have been received and continue to be published by the *Daily Illini*. This author's letter, written on behalf of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Students for Social Equality, was published on Wednesday. It read:

"The anger of Muslims unleashed by the racist 'prophet' cartoons must be contextualized. In Europe, Denmark included, Muslims tend to be a poor and exploited, but growing, section of the population. European politicians have increasingly promoted anti-Islamic chauvinism as a means of diverting anger from unpopular 'austerity' social policies. On Europe's extreme right, anti-Muslim chauvinism is truly blood curdling (Le Pen in France, Bossi in Italy, Haider in Austria, etc.). The Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*, which first published the cartoons, is cut from this cloth. It supports the anti-immigrant Danish People's Party and has historical ties to German fascism. This is no friend of freedom of speech!

"To this must be added the deep anger resulting from the continuing oppression of the working masses of the Middle East and South Asia at the hands of Western imperialism. It is within living memory that the entire Muslim world, from West Africa to Indonesia, was under the yoke of British, French, Italian and Dutch imperialism. Israel was carved out of Arab lands with the backing of the Western powers, and continues the process of dispossessing the native Palestinian population. And now the US has placed Afghanistan and Iraq—where the images of sadistic torture at Abu Graib have been seared into the consciousness of a generation—under de facto colonial rule while menacing Iran and Syria with wider war.

"Indeed, behind the utterly hypocritical lectures on the violence and supposed 'irrationality' of Islamic culture lurks yet another pretext for the predatory machinations of Western imperialism."

On Wednesday, February 22, University of Illinois Students for Social Equality (SSE) will hold a public meeting titled, "Anti-Muslim Cartoons: An Ugly and Calculated Provocation." David Walsh, arts editor of the *World Socialist Web Site*, and Tom Mackaman, president of Illinois SSE and Socialist Equality Party candidate for State Representative in 2004, will address the meeting, which will then be followed by discussion.

The meeting will be held at 7 p.m. in 317 Gregory Hall on the corner of Wright St. and Armory St. in Champaign. The meeting is open to the public, and SSE warmly encourages all students and workers interested in discussing the significance and context of the cartoons to attend.



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