

New York City schools chancellor removes pro-Palestine parent from education committee

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In a blatant attack on the democratic rights of parents, educators and students, New York City School Chancellor David Banks last week removed parent Tajh Sutton from the presidency of Community Education Council for District 14 (CEC 14) in Brooklyn's Williamsburg and Greenpoint neighborhoods for her opposition to Israel's genocide in Gaza.

Community Education Councils are elected boards of parents in each of New York City Public Schools' 32 districts. They are tasked with advocacy for parents and students and perform certain functions such as, according to the school department, "reviewing and evaluating their district's educational programs, approving zoning lines, and holding public hearings on certain matters." Most members of the CECs are elected while some are appointed by Borough Presidents.

Since the state granted the city's mayor dictatorial control of the city's public schools in 2002—an act to facilitate school closings and budget cuts, and privatization under the then billionaire mayor Michael Bloomberg—taking power away from district school boards, the CECs are some of the only remaining democratic institutions in the city's schools.

Banks removed Sutton under the Department of Education's (DOE) D-210 regulations that govern CEC members code of conduct. At issue was her advocacy of a ceasefire in Gaza and support for the Palestinian people. In his letter to Sutton obtained by Chalkbeat, Banks claimed that she had "justifiably been perceived by many community members as anti-Israel and antisemitic."

Chalkbeat noted: "Banks also accuses Sutton of improperly seeking to influence hiring decisions by protesting the dismissal of a paraprofessional allegedly fired from his school over his conduct at pro-Palestinian protests and social media posts."

The educator referenced was an object of harassment by Zionist parents, including one who had worked for the Israel Defense Forces's top brass, because he wore a keffiyeh, the

traditional Palestinian scarf, to work. He was suspended twice for his social media posts in opposition to the genocide in Gaza, and finally fired after he was arrested for protesting the police crackdown on protesting college students.

Sutton was also removed because she had held meetings of CEC 14 virtually, a means which she and other leaders used to avoid harassment by Zionist and far-right parents, particularly in the aftermath of the resolution CEC 14 issued in November calling for a ceasefire in Gaza, when Sutton had been threatened with human feces left in her mailbox.

Sutton told the *New York Times*, "They're setting a dangerous precedent for how parents are able to show up and advocate for their communities ... It shouldn't be a removable offense to say that Palestinians deserve to live."

The charges by Banks are absurd and a slander on the thousands of educators, students and parents who are horrified by Israel's actions in Gaza and the West Bank, and by the close collaboration of the Biden administration in committing them. Banks's action was a further message, especially to educators, to keep their mouths shut when it comes to war and genocide.

Since October 7, Banks has sought to suppress the rights of parents, educators and students. In November he threatened educators in particular: "When speech and action—even on one's personal time—undermines the mission or core functions of NYCPS, we will review and take appropriate action on a case-by-case basis."

The actions of Banks are part and parcel of right-wing Democratic mayor Eric Adams's brutal attack on scores of campus protests in the city with the use of heavily armed anti-terrorism police.

These moves have been carried out in concert at the highest levels of the state in a bipartisan effort to suppress free speech on Palestine and anti-war positions.

Last month Banks testified at a congressional hearing on antisemitism, bragging: "We have removed, disciplined or are in the process of disciplining at least a dozen staff and

school leaders, including removing a principal in the middle of a school year. We have suspended at least 30 students, we have involved the NYPD...”

Banks’s and Adams’s actions have broadly been opposed by educators. Thousands of them have protested the genocide at city-wide demonstrations. NYC Educators for Palestine (NYCEP) has held actions demanding that the of United Federation of Teachers (UFT) call for a ceasefire and protested the open support given to the Zionist state by Randi Weingarten, the president of the UFT’s parent organization, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). The AFT has been working overtime to ensure the re-election of “Genocide Joe” Biden in November.

Most recently NYCEP has held protests demanding that the Teachers’ Retirement System of the City of New York “divest from all Israeli securities,” according to the group’s Twitter/X feed. On May 31, high-school students held a large rally at Tweed Courthouse, the headquarters of the DOE, in Manhattan to demand an end to the genocide in Gaza.

Banks has also suspended a member of CEC 2 in Manhattan, the fascist-minded parent Maud Maron, who was highly unpopular with parents for her support of Moms for Liberty and her vocal opposition to transgender youth. No educator should take Bank’s ploy at evenhandedness seriously. It is widely understood that Maron is a provocateur whose work against educators and students will continue. In fact, the policies of the far-right and Democratic Party are growing closer together, particularly in support of the Gaza genocide and preparations for war with Russia and China.

Maron is one of the plaintiffs in a federal suit against the DOE and Sutton herself that alleges that Sutton and other leaders of CEC 14 have violated the first amendment rights of Zionist and other far-right parents.

Particularly objectionable to Maron and her cohorts is the toolkit that CEC 14 distributed for the demonstration in November which contained suggestions for chants. According to the suit, “The toolkit advised demonstrators to ‘practice these CHANTS and use them for your walkout,’ linking to various suggested chants including ‘We don’t want Zionists here,’ ‘Zionism has got to go,’ “Resistance is justified when people are occupied,” “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free.”

And indeed, the fascist wing of the Republican party, embodied by Maron, is giving the lead to Banks’s reactionary actions. The lawsuit puts forward essentially the same arguments which he used to remove Sutton.

The move to censor Sutton has been broadly denounced by educators and education advocacy organizations. The Alliance for Quality Education (AQE) issued a statement

that read in part: “AQE stands firmly with Tajh Sutton acknowledging her tireless efforts to create an inclusive and just public education system, centered in our collective and global humanity.”

The Central Education Consortium said, “This action, taken by this chancellor, has taken mayoral control of NYC’s public schools to a new low. It is bad enough that this system has been dictatorial for the last two decades- this action has truly pushed the system even further away from any semblance of a democratic school system.”

A teacher on Twitter/X commented “Fucked up to remove someone who did nothing wrong (Tajh Sutton) just to try to seem ‘fair and balanced’ in the eyes of hatemongers angry about Maud Maron’s (long overdue) removal.”

The actions of Adams and Banks have a broad and dangerous significance. They are a part of the suppression of student protests internationally by a ruling capitalist elite which is hell-bent on creating a political climate in which it can expand war and genocide not only in the Middle East but in Europe and East Asia.

While Sutton can be reinstated by the DOE main governing body, Panel for Education Policy, the committee itself is dominated by appointees of the pro-genocide Democratic governor Kathy Hochul and mayor Adams.

Educators must take the lead in defending Sutton and CEC 14, as well as their brothers and sisters who have been threatened, silenced, fired and maligned by the Adams administration. There is enormous power in the tens of thousands whose students are being groomed for war against Iran, Russia and China and told to tolerate the war of extermination in Palestine.

The UFT, predictably, has made no statement in defense of Sutton. The executives who run the unions are the main impediment against the mobilization of paraprofessionals, teachers, school staff and other education workers for democratic rights and against war and genocide. Educators must now strike out on the path of action in defense of democratic rights independent from the capitalist parties and the union. The WSWS urges all educators who want to take up this fight to contact the Educators Rank-and-File Committee to organize independent action.



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