

Protest against removal of pro-Palestinian teacher shuts down Philadelphia school board meeting

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Several dozen parents and students staged a protest at a Philadelphia School District board of education meeting Thursday in defense of a teacher who had recently been terminated for her outspoken views on the Israeli government's genocide of the Palestinians. The protest temporarily shut down the board's proceedings, forcing it to reconvene in a remote location.

Keziah Ridgeway, a teacher of African American history, Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) courses at Northeast Philadelphia High School, was removed from her job at the beginning of the school year following complaints the school district received from pro-Israel groups.

"For every district official who participated in the baseless censure of Ms. Ridgeway, this is the legacy you leave behind," stated fellow Philadelphia teacher Hannah Gann at the board of education meeting Thursday.

Gann attended the event along with a cohort of parents involved with Philadelphia Parents for Palestine. The group has launched a Change.org petition for the teacher to be reinstated, which declares "Every day that Keziah Ridgeway is not teaching her students, they are falling behind in their AP, IB and other classwork. Students have dropped out of her classes as the substitutes cannot prepare these students for the AP tests, for example, and every day more damage is done."

Ridgeway, a 2020 recipient of the prestigious Lindback Award for teaching, is an outspoken proponent of the Palestinian people in their fight against Zionist oppression. In January, she allowed several students in one of her courses to construct a

podcast on Palestinian resistance art. This presentation was viewable to the school community, attracting attacks from right wing groups.

The ensuing smear campaign and witch hunt resulted in the school system's cowardly decision to censor the student's exhibit while Ridgeway began incurring the wrath of pro-Zionist groups in Philadelphia.

"I have struggled with crippling anxiety and feelings of being unsafe for the last few months and have also had to undergo therapy to deal with the harassment," Ridgeway, who is black and a Muslim, told the *Philadelphia Inquirer*.

The harassment she alleges to have received from affiliates of the Jewish Family Association (JFA) includes being told to go "back to where she came from," being shoulder-bumped by a former Israel Defense Forces (IDF) soldier and having to endure threats that the group will have her "touched."

In early September, Ridgeway posted to her Instagram account that "Y'all [JFA] been harassing me for almost a year. Writing 10 page letters to the US Congress, Governor Shapiro, Philly City Council and The School District. Reporting me to Canary Mission like I give AF." She was "taking the gloves off" and inquired if anyone knew of any "Black owned [gun emoji] shops in or near Philly? Asking for a friend."

The JFA's legal support quickly lodged a complaint. The Deborah Project's Lori Lowenthal Marcus alleged that Ridgeway was an "aggressively antisemitic school teacher" with "profanity-laced, hateful public comments targeting Jewish families and students in the district."

The Deborah Project and Marcus carry ties to far-right-wing circles. Marcus is a member of the

American Zionist Movement and has publicly joined the fascistic attacks on the teaching of Critical Race Theory (CRT) in schools. According to the Deborah Project, CRT is a tool of supposed “far left antisemitism” which “denounces the creation of the State of Israel as an exercise in land theft by white colonialists.”

The Philadelphia School District caved in immediately to the Zionist pressure despite the dubious claims and groups involved in the complaints. “Threats of violence towards our school communities are not tolerated and we work closely with the appropriate authorities when handling these situations,” stated district spokesperson Christina Clark last month.

The school district has launched an investigation into the social media post. This is despite Ridgeway being cleared on two previous occasions of allegations originating from the same group.

The efforts to muzzle anti-genocide advocates comes as the Philadelphia School District is facing a severe teacher shortage, particularly in more impoverished areas. A report published this month by the Philadelphia Talent Coalition found that the crisis was so bad that under-qualified emergency personnel were being used to teach courses in the school district. The study found 1 in 5 teachers in the district were not qualified for the courses they taught. In charter schools, the ratio was 1 in 4.

The protest on Thursday was composed of concerned parents as well as Ridgeway’s students. The *Inquirer* said students on hand said Ridgeway “is a strong supporter of all young people, not just those who look like her and believe the things she does.”

Arun Kundnani, a parent from a nearby school, stated of Ridgeway’s removal, “This seems to me to be a new form of McCarthyism.” The Northeast High School teacher “has been targeted because she refuses to censor her students from expressing opinions that some people disagree with.”

The attack on Ridgeway comes as part of escalating anti-democratic attacks on students and professors throughout the region. At nearby Swarthmore College, 11 undergraduate students face expulsion for using a bullhorn after the school changed its definition of assault to include “loud chanting.” Last week, the University of Pennsylvania ordered a police raid on an off-campus housing unit belonging to student protest

organizers.

At Muhlenberg College in Allentown, Pennsylvania, anthropology professor Maura Finkelstein has become the first tenured professor to be fired for exercising her right to speak publicly in opposition to the Gaza genocide.

“Zionism and Judaism are not the same,” Dr. Finkelstein, who is Jewish, explained to the *World Socialist Web Site* in an interview earlier this month. “We know that an ethnic and religious identity and a political ideology are not the same,” she added, “But really what this is being used to do is to silence all dissent against Zionism, and to silence all voices that are speaking out for Palestinian liberation.”



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