

2024 FORM FOR NEW BUSINESS ITEMS

NBI Name: Defending Academic Freedom Date and Time: 4/22/24 4:36 pm

Delegate Making the Motion: Merrie Najimy Cell: Email: Local Association or Retired: LEXINGTON- LEA

Delegate Seconding the Motion: Amanda Achin Cell: Email: Local Association or Retired: Classified Staff Union, UMass Boston

According to the MTA Standing/Special Rules: With the exception of items on the agenda, all substantive motions shall be submitted in writing to the Presiding Officer.

MOTION

MOVED:

There is a nationally coordinated, well-funded and ideologically-driven assault on public education and on educators who teach about oppression and liberation, including ethnic studies, anti-colonial studies, and LGBTQ studies, in preK-12 and higher education. This has led to book banning, dismantling of ethnic studies programs, banning of anti-racism/social justice pedagogy and curriculum, and attacks on educators and students who bring education about Palestine into their classrooms. Those same forces are attacking political activism on campuses and in the streets that seeks liberation for Palestinians and a peaceful solution to the conflict in Palestine. Strategies include, but are not limited to the weaponization of the concept of oppression; lobbying local, state, and federal institutions to adopt right-wing, ideologically-driven curricula and/or legislation; and using threats and intimidation tactics against students and educators.

In order to help safeguard members’ academic freedom and First Amendment rights and protect them from harm in this increasingly repressive environment, the MTA will take appropriate actions relevant to each situation to actively:

1. Defend members facing retaliation or harassment for their protected speech by committing support and resources from all its divisions, and use the union’s communications channels to advise members of these resources.
2. Provide training for MTA staff and all interested members and leaders about academic freedom, First Amendment rights and how to protect members who come under attack. These trainings should be led by experts in defending education workers preK-16 on free speech issues. Training workshops should be provided by December 31, 2024, and annually thereafter.
3. Educate members to be equipped to oppose the weaponization of the concept of oppression in order to censor curriculum, ban books, and silence viewpoints in public education spaces. This weaponization includes dishonest redefinitions of existing terminology used to discuss oppression and oppressive

structures, as well as the invention of new terminology. Examples of this weaponization include, but are not limited to:

- The redefinition of “Critical Race Theory (CRT),” an academic and legal framework that posits that systemic racism is part of American society, but which has been redefined by some groups to mean things like “teaching children to hate white people,” or “reverse racism.”
 - The invention of “Critical Social Justice Ideology (CSJ),” a new umbrella term that is being used to fight efforts to include the history and perspectives of people of color and LGBTQ+ people in educational curriculum.
 - The dangerous and reductive redefinition of “antisemitism” to include criticism of the state of Israel, in order to suppress advocacy for Palestinian rights..
4. Oppose attempts to mandate the adoption of curricula produced by right-wing groups.
 5. Oppose the movement to apply and/or formally adopt the IHRA (International Holocaust Remembrance Association) definition of antisemitism, which conflates criticism of Israel (a state) and Zionism (a political ideology) with the traditional definition of antisemitism (hostility to or prejudice against Jewish people). This false conflation is being used to suppress and censor teaching and learning about Palestine and Palestinians as well as to attack educators and students who advocate for Palestinians and express dissent from the political establishment's support for Israel's campaign in Gaza and policies towards the West Bank.
 6. Create and publicize a mechanism for reporting and tracking incidences of educators who are retaliated against for exercising academic freedom and their First Amendment rights and report the data to the membership.

SUBMITTER'S RATIONALE:

We are facing a fundamental crisis of democracy in this country. MTA members have been, and are currently under, attack for expressing protected speech outside of schools and universities and for teaching about Black Lives Matter, Ethnic Studies, LGBTQ+ history and identity, Palestinian history and identity, and all subjects related to oppression and liberation. The pressure and fear we are experiencing is leading to self-censorship in order to protect ourselves and our jobs. This weakens democracy in and out of our schools and universities. It denies students the opportunities to receive a robust education where they can grapple critically with complex issues that will help them become fully prepared to participate in and defend democracy. Fundamental to the role of an education union is protecting its members' rights.

Furthermore, while the attack on academic freedom at all levels has been ramping up the past few years, efforts to silence widespread criticism of Israel's siege on Gaza has led to a "new McCarthyism," which includes congressional hearings with elected officials grilling university presidents. Similar congressional hearings for PreK-12 public education districts have already been scheduled for May. And if successful, efforts here in Massachusetts to formally impose the controversial IHRA definition of antisemitism will likely lead to even more repression and censorship in our public education spaces.

As an education union, we must not only defend members' rights, but we must also stand up for educators' and students' rights to teach, learn, and speak freely in a democracy.

DUES IMPACT: \$0

SUBMITTER'S COST & STAFF TIME ESTIMATE: TBD

MTA COST & STAFF TIME ESTIMATE (For MTA use only):

MTA Cost Estimate: \$0

MTA Staff Time Estimate: 400