

Attacks on Labor Educators and Labor Historians

Posted on April 26, 2011 by Rosemary Feurer

A systematic attack on university professors teaching labor history began in Kansas City, Missouri in April, 2010. LAWCHA quickly mobilized in defense of academic freedom.

Andrew Breitbart's Affront to Democracy and Attack on Students' Right to an Education

Statement by Judy Ancel

I am Judy Ancel, director of the Institute for Labor Studies at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. While my university prepares its response, I feel compelled to answer the attacks by Andrew Breitbart on my character. I am speaking as an individual and certainly not for UMKC. I am speaking out of my strong lifelong commitment to educating working people to better understand the world they live in. Labor education is a vital part of anyone's education. All Americans, especially our youth, need to understand the contributions working people have made and make in building our communities and nation. Labor education gives them the skills and vision to make a better world.

My students and I are outraged at Mr. Breitbart's invasion of our classroom and his attempts to intimidate us and my colleagues at the university. Mr. Breitbart's chop shop manufactured videos from 30 hours of classroom recordings that were posted for the course, "Labor, Politics, and Society," on the university's Blackboard system. Presumably these were delivered to him by a student, in possible violation of the University Standards of Conduct and the Federal Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act. These videos were recorded for the use of students enrolled in this course, and for them only. Breitbart disassembled the material, and reassembled it; arranging them to give the appearance that instructors of the class advocate violence. This is in fact the opposite of the position both instructors took in class. Any examination of labor's past would be incomplete without discussion of violence, (which for the most part was directed at workers) and analysis of its roots. At no time did my co-instructor, Don Giljum, nor I advocate violence.

There's no doubt that Breitbart's attacks are politically motivated, part of a broad agenda to weaken unions and the public sector as well as public education. His fabrications have been exposed numerous times in the mainstream media. Yet he and his echo chamber at Fox News continue to cause great harm to educators and other public servants.

On April 18th Breitbart announced his intentions on Fox News Sean Hannity show: "We're going to take on education next, go after the teachers and the union organizers." It is possible that his attack on the University of Missouri and labor education is his first assault.

Breitbart is a master of taking quotes out of context, deletion of what doesn't serve his purpose, and remixing to achieve totally different meaning. For example he has me saying:

- Breitbart's version: "Violence is a tactic and it's to be used when it's the appropriate tactic."
- The real version: After students had watched a film on the 1968 Memphis Sanitation Workers' Strike and the assassination of Martin Luther King, they were discussing nonviolence. I said, "One guy in the film. . . said 'violence is a tactic, and it's to be used when it's the appropriate tactic.' . . . " The class proceeded to discuss and debate this.

Thus Mr. Breitbart's editing has literally put words in my mouth that were not mine, and they never were mine.

Breitbart leaves out a crucial statement by Don Giljum in order to make it appear that he advocates violence. Giljum said, "I'm not sure as a tactic today the type of violence or reaction to the violence we had back then would be called for here, and I think it would do more harm than good." A student then says "and it just legitimizes their dirty tricks." Giljum agreed with him.

There are a number of other instances of very creative editing including:

- A change of clothes by Don Giljum from one sentence to another
- The insertion of a sentence by me about crisis situations taken from an entirely different class about how governments use crises to launch big unpopular changes. This is inserted into my lecture on collective bargaining to make it appear that I am advocating that unions provoke crises in the workplace. I have never advocated that. In fact I make sure students understand the limits of union and individual action under both law and the union contract.
- Making it appear that Don advocates sabotage when his point was about the sad state

of labor law and the decline of the right to strike.

These videos are no idle prank. They do real harm. Both Don and I are receiving threats and ugly and scary messages. There are death threats against us on Breitbart's blog.

These videos are an attack on higher education and its mission to working adults, putting labor education programs at risk. They create fear and have an enormously chilling effect on freedom of thought and expression. They seek to undermine the academic freedom that is required to study, better understand, and hopefully improve our conditions of life. Sadly, they have already shattered the very positive atmosphere of trust and openness that we worked so hard to create in this class. One of my students told me, with some discomfort, "My boss watches Fox News." Our students' identities have been compromised. Their right to privacy has been breached, and none of us gave permission for these videos or our images to be placed on the internet. Another student wrote me, "The classroom provides a safe place, or a 'free speech zone', where it's natural that, at times, those of us not used to discussing these topics make inflammatory statements, radical sounding claims etc. that are a part of thinking through the issues and emotions surrounding them. It seems to me that a classroom can be a healthy place to do so, because of the ground rules that are set: everyone gets a chance to speak, respect for opposing views is expected and so on."

And of course these posted videos are an attack on the rights of working people and on anything that is public, including public universities. The right of workers to have a voice in their workplaces and in their economic lives is a human right recognized by freedom-loving people around the world. Education about how to best make those rights a reality should be part of every school's curriculum, certainly in our universities. Yet this attempt to marginalize it and make teachers and students afraid to discuss it is the antithesis of all we stand for.

These attacks on me, my colleague, and the students in my course are an affront to democracy and must be challenged by citizens, workers and students, or else they will continue.

Official Statement from the University of Missouri, Kansas City, April 28, 2011

The University of Missouri-Kansas City continues to review approximately 18 hours of unedited video from the Labor, Politics and Society class. From the review completed to date, it is clear that edited videos posted on the Internet depict statements from the instructors in an inaccurate and distorted manner by taking their statements out of context and reordering the sequence in which those statements were actually made so as to change

their meaning. Such selective editing is disturbing and the release of students' images without their permission is a violation of their privacy rights.

We want to underscore our commitment to the importance of academic freedom, freedom of speech and the free-flowing discussion of challenging topics in our courses. We also recognize the serious responsibilities this places on us to ensure a balanced perspective is offered to our students within our curriculum.

In this particular case, we also affirm our belief that studying labor unions, their history, and their role in society is an important subject given the role they have played and continue to play in the United States and the world. As a result, we continue to review the appropriate place for such an offering within our curriculum.

During the course of our review the past couple of days, UMSL has accepted the resignation of its lecturer.

Statement from Gail Hackett, Provost
University of Missouri-Kansas City

David Roediger and the Working Class Studies Association Responds

Past presidents, the president, and the president-elect of the Working Class Studies Association have drafted and signed a strong statement of support for Judy Ancel and Don Giljum, labor educators under attack in a right-wing video campaign. A link to an account of the events and the statement are below.

peace,
Dave Roediger

Statement

Dear Judy Ancel and Don Giljum,

As past-presidents, president, and president-elect of the Working Class Studies Association, we write in solidarity with you both during this time of attacks on you, on free speech, and on the labor movement. We support efforts to correct the record following Andrew Breitbart's misleading mixing of decontextualized quotes from your classrooms to create a video caricaturing what occurs there and in labor education generally. We insist that classrooms in which the working class and the labor movement are studied must be sites for free exploration of all topics, however controversial and subject to misrepresentation.

We deplore the gullibility, and in many cases the anti-labor political agenda, that led media to give extravagant play to Breitbart's mendacious video, especially given that he has serially discredited himself with similar frauds, particularly in the case of Shirley Sherrod. We are appalled by the use of re-edited video tapes and doctored quotes to make false accusations against you. Such tactics could not only damage your careers, but also are often designed to destroy sympathy and identification with the labor movement. Stunts such as Mr. Breitbart's can have a chilling effect, especially among contingent faculty. We call upon faculty, students, administrators and labor organizations to condemn them.

- Sherry Linkon (Past President)
- Peter Rachleff (Past President)
- Kitty Krupat (Past President)
- David Roediger (Past President)
- Michelle Tokarczyk (Past President)
- Fred Gardaphe (President)
- Nick Coles (President-Elect)

What You Can Do

Send letters of support for Don Giljum to University of Missouri-St. Louis Chancellor Thomas F. George, chancellor@umsl.edu and copy Deborah Baldini, Associate Dean for Continuing Education, BaldiniD@msx.umsl.edu.

It would be useful to challenge the administration's forced resignation of Don Giljum without investigation and due process. Call for his reinstatement and rehiring in future semesters.

Statement from past and current presidents, Labor and Working-Class History Association (LAWCHA)

In defense of academic freedom: the case of University of Missouri labor educators, Judy Ancel and Don Giljum

As past and current presidents of an organization devoted to the open dissemination and discussion of issues related to labor and working-class history, we deplore the extraordinary violation of core principles of academic freedom that occurred recently in labor studies

classes at the University of Missouri campuses in Kansas City and St. Louis. Those principles involve respect for the privacy of students and faculty members as they engage in free and open discussion of ideas, and are essential to the maintenance of high quality education inside and outside formal academic settings. We speak out as academic historians and labor educators.

The recent violations of academic freedom were perpetrated by Andrew Breitbart, who surreptitiously and illegally, gained access to videos of classroom discussions in labor education programs at the University of Missouri. Breitbart then created an edited and distorted record of those discussions that implied advocacy of violence in labor disputes. The final tape falsified the views of the instructors. The edited video record, parts of which were shown on Fox News and on the internet, have led to the forced resignation of Mr. Giljum and personal threats to both Mr. Giljum and Ms. Ancel.

As labor educators and teachers of labor history, we deplore all efforts to inhibit free classroom discussion and to misrepresent its content. We hope that all those who believe that the airing of ideas is possible only in an atmosphere of free and open education will denounce this attack on academic freedom. We call on the University of Missouri, St. Louis and the University of Missouri, Kansas City to maintain its commitment to the defense academic freedom for its instructors, Don Giljum and Judy Ancel. Anything less than full and unqualified support for them can only have a chilling effect on open inquiry and academic freedom essential to quality education.

LAWCHA Presidents

James Green, University of Massachusetts, Boston (2004-06)

Alice Kessler Harris, Columbia University (2006-08)

Michael Honey, University of Washington, Tacoma (2008-10)

Kimberley Phillips, College of William and Mary (2010-2012)

Links and Op-Eds

- [*St. Louis Today*, "Missouri-St. Louis Lecturer Resigns Over Video"](#), April 29, 2011
- [*St. Louis Today*, "KC University Supports Lecturer in Video Flap"](#), April 29, 2011
- [*Inside Higher Ed*, "The Shirley Sherrods of Academe?"](#), April 29, 2011

Author



[Rosemary Feurer](#)

Rosemary Feurer is Professor of History at Northern Illinois University. She is the author of *Radical Unionism in the Midwest, 1900-1950*, among other books and essays. She is working on *The Illinois Mine Wars, 1860-1940* and a new biography of Mary Harris "Mother" Jones.