

Race committee under fire over holocaust material

BY KATHLEEN GRIFFIN
Staff Writer

An attempt to oust a member of the York District Public School Board's race relations committee, after he distributed what Jewish groups call hate material at an anti-racism conference has failed.

Now the Canadian Jewish Congress is demanding director of education Bill Hogarth force volunteer committee member Bader Abu-Zahra to resign.

"If the committee won't take action, it falls on the York Region board to take action," said Bernie Farber, CJC executive director. "There's no question the material is anti-Semitic. Our concern is that any member of any board would distribute such material, especially at a function for anti-racism."

The teachers' conference was held in April. Abu-Zahra distributed copies of a book review and analysis written by M.H. Faruqi on Norman Finkelstein's book "The Holocaust Industry — Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering."

Finkelstein is known for his assertion that the Holocaust is used by Jewish organizations for political power and financial gain. In his two-page analysis, Faruqi wrote the book's greatest value lies in the separating the true Holocaust from its crass exploitation and the Zionists from the People of the Book.

When Thornhill trustee Alan Shefman, also chair of the race relations advisory committee, confirmed Abu-Zahra was handing copies of the review out to teachers and committee members, he wrote him a letter demanding his resignation.

"He came to the conference intending to hand this material out, and did it without anyone's knowledge," said Shefman, who is a former education director with the Ontario Human Rights Commission and a member of the B'nai B'rith league of human rights.

Abu-Zahra, a Markham resident and community member of the advisory committee, refused to resign.

Instead, he responded to Shefman with a three-page letter which he invited the Economist & Sun/Tribune to quote for this story.

"The allegations you have directed at me are groundless," Abu-Zahra wrote, adding a presenter at the conference who called for a special focus on the

Holocaust in school curriculum confirmed his worst fears.

"This position is exclusive and marginalizes the suffering of other people," the letter states, using as example one million Armenians killed between 1915 and 1924, the slaughter of 14.5 Ukrainians, the wounding of 3.5 million Chinese during World War II and the genocide of Canada's First Nations.

At the May 10 meeting, Shefman made a motion that members ask the

school board to remove Abu-Zahra from the committee. The motion was defeated.

"The matter is over," Abu-Zahra said in an interview Friday, adding the committee moved on and met without acrimony Thursday night. "Everything is over."

Education director Hogarth had the same opinion, adding the board's hands are tied in any case.

"The race relations advisory com-

mittee is duly constituted by the board, it represents the total community in terms of the nine jurisdictions and it seeks a balance racially. The committee dealt with that issue, they discussed it, there was a vote. The vote was democratic and as far as the board goes, that's the end of it."

Hogarth added if the board could intervene in decisions made by its committees, there wouldn't be much point in having committees at all.

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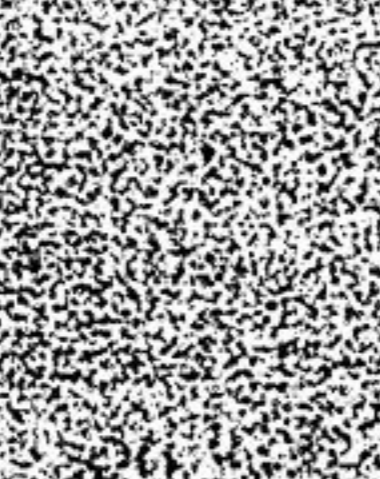
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