

The Faculty

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Professor Says Views on Israel Kept Her From Tenure at Ithaca

By ROBIN WILSON

A sociology professor at Ithaca College who has been denied tenure there twice says colleagues and administrators let their political views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict get in the way of their judgments on her tenure bid.

The assistant professor, Margo Ramlal-Nankoe, has hired the same law firm that represented Norman G. Finkelstein, who was denied tenure at DePaul University last year after a highly public battle that focused on his critical writings about Israel. DePaul reached a settlement with Mr. Finkelstein last September (*The Chronicle*, September 6, 2007).

Ms. Ramlal-Nankoe, who is from India and grew up in the Caribbean, teaches courses on women in the third world and on global race and ethnic relations, and has been a faculty adviser for a group called Students for a Just Peace, which opposes the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories.

She does not consider herself either pro-Israel or pro-Palestine, said her lawyer, Lynne Bernabei, "but many of the countries and societies she writes about are supportive of something other than Israeli policy, so she is tagged with that."

Ms. Bernabei's Washington law firm, Bernabei and Wachtel, sent a letter last month to Ithaca's president and the chairman of its Board of Trustees, saying that both of Ms. Ramlal-Nankoe's tenure reviews had been influenced by "blatant political lobbying against her based on her teachings on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict."

Clashes with a dean

Specifically, the letter says that Ms. Ramlal-Nankoe was not deemed friendly to Israel by Howard Erlich, who retired in May after 20 years as dean of Ithaca's School of Humanities and Sciences. Mr. Erlich and Ms. Ramlal-Nankoe clashed, the letter says, because he considered the student group she advised and some speakers she invited to the campus to be anti-Israel.

The letter asks the college to grant Ms. Ramlal-Nankoe tenure or face a legal battle.

A spokesman for Ithaca said he could not talk specifically about the professor's tenure case, citing the confidentiality of personnel matters. But he said tenure decisions were based solely on teaching, service, and scholarship.

Mr. Erlich did not return telephone calls.

The letter sent on behalf of Ms. Ramlal-Nankoe says it is clear the negative decisions on her tenure bid were politically motivated because the university flip-flopped on the formal reason it gave for why she didn't deserve tenure.

After Ms. Ramlal-Nankoe's first evaluation, in 2006, according to the letter from her lawyer, the college said she had met the criteria for teaching but was deficient in her scholarship. When the assistant professor complained about "irregularities" in her tenure review — including what she called political influence by the dean at the time — the college agreed to evaluate her again in two years.

During that period, the letter says, Ms. Ramlal-Nankoe worked on her scholarship, completing two books (including one that was written with another scholar), and one peer-reviewed article.

But when her tenure bid was reconsidered this year, a review panel in the sociology department said it had found "patterns of unevenness" in her teaching.

The letter says Ithaca's decision to deny her tenure violated Ms. Ramlal-Nankoe's academic freedom. "This is the kind of McCarthyism that is going around on campuses right now," said Ms. Bernabei.

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