

NYC professor of black history says CUNY illegally seized \$12M worth of research materials — then lost most of it

Ginger Adams Otis



Professor Joseph Wilson has filed a \$2 million dollar suit against CUNY, claiming it wrongfully terminated him and discarded his collection of African-American research, worth over \$12 million dollars, in the process. (Luiz C. Ribeiro for New York Daily News)

A celebrated African-American political science professor who was fired by the City

University of New York is embroiled in a multi-million dollar federal lawsuit claiming the school illegally seized his black history research — valued at more than \$12 million — and lost most of it.

Professor Joseph Wilson says decades of his correspondence, lectures, writings, books and research — including some items that can't be replaced — were boxed up and carted away by clueless CUNY security guards without warning years ago in a series of warrant-less raids of his school offices after he was accused of enriching himself at the school's expense.

Over the past seven years — as Wilson fought fruitlessly to save his Brooklyn College teaching job — he's tried without success to track down his items, some of which he says he's found tossed into boxes, strewn across school shelves and stuffed into plastic bags. Others seemingly disappeared entirely.

Wilson's lawsuit in Brooklyn federal court seeks unspecified punitive and compensatory damages, and he hopes to finally force CUNY to dig up his property — or pay for what's lost.

“All I want is justice. What gives people the right, for whatever alleged violations they used to fire me, to trash my history and my intellectual property?” Wilson told the Daily News. “The university has to be held accountable and apologize profusely and profoundly. They made some dastardly errors.”



NYC Public Advocate Letitia (Tish) James (Jefferson Siegel/New York Daily News)

CUNY said a neutral arbitrator found Wilson was properly terminated due to “serious misconduct” that included taking an additional \$100,000 in compensation he wasn't entitled to over a three-year period and submitting false documents to college officials.

“We look forward to a full airing of all of the facts in this case, which clearly show that Mr. Wilson’s claims are without merit,” a spokesman said. CUNY has denied his allegations in its own legal responses.

“The lawsuit is built on false allegations,” the spokesman added.

The New York Attorney General’s office, which is defending the case, declined to comment, but it should be an interesting one for new AG Tish James, who has spoken openly about the vital importance of preserving black history and once admonished the city for trying to erase it.

“I can’t imagine a world that denies our history or legacy,” she said at the time.

Wilson, 67, couldn’t imagine such a world either. A leading expert on the history of the black working class and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the first African-American union, he’d enjoyed a long, tenured career as a political science professor at Brooklyn College.

With CUNY’s blessing in 1993, he founded the Brooklyn College Center for Diversity and MultiCultural Studies, dedicated to increasing diversity in the student body, classroom topics and teachers at the school. In 1997, two years after he made tenure, he was also appointed director of the Graduate Center for Worker Education in lower Manhattan.

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Dr. Wilson's research and materials left in open boxes with no labels, as loose files, and in unmarked plastic bags strewn indiscriminately. (Dr. Joseph Wilson)

All was well until late in January 2012, when approximately eight CUNY security staffers showed up at the Worker Education Center at 25 Broadway and started grabbing Wilson's files, according to his lawsuit.

“We were told not to move, that we couldn’t make any phone calls, or leave the office or speak to anyone,” said Wilson, who was present with four or five staffers.

Several months later, the suit says, the seizure was repeated on the Brooklyn College campus, where Wilson had two offices. Gone were his letters with poet and fellow teacher Allen Ginsberg, his correspondence with music icon Ray Charles, a transcript and notes on a previously undiscovered speech by Martin Luther King Jr., and thousands more pages and items.

Even his research into a death threat made against labor great A. Philip Randolph, who was mailed a severed human hand as a warning from an opposing political faction, was taken.

Randolph was naive enough to tell the FBI, Wilson said, and when he’d tracked down the files through a Freedom of Information request, the professor found a copy of a picture of the actual hand — and a note from the FBI field agent that said “Take no action.”

“That meant they were hoping Randolph would wind up killed, and I don’t know where those documents are,” said Wilson.

He also can’t find the bulk of his 40 years of academic research — work that independent scholars valued at \$12 to \$14 million.

Wilson was banned from teaching in December 2012, and for two years endured a “Kafkaesque” nightmare in which CUNY ran its own internal probe — handled by a former federal prosecutor for New York’s Southern District — into the financial misappropriation allegations against him. Simultaneously, a referral was made to the AG, which started a criminal investigation into Wilson. Both probes centered on claims Wilson made too much money.

By 2014, with the AG unable to find any evidence of a crime, CUNY brought administrative charges against Wilson, who at that time earned \$115,000 as a professor, plus roughly \$40,000 as director of Worker Education and approximately \$40,000 for summer school teaching, as he had for years. He also earned about \$10,000 as part of a \$400,000 grant he’d secured for CUNY that was meant to train African American men to become teachers.



Dr. Wilson's research and materials in unlabeled files and open folders left unattended and strewn in open and unmarked plastic bags (Dr. Joseph Wilson)

“The money was built into the grant and signed off on by CUNY,” he said.
“Everything I was earning had prior approval.”

After a two-year fight from Wilson and his union Professional Staff Congress lawyer, the arbitrator ruled that Wilson had exceeded the contractual professor cap of \$116,000. He was terminated in 2016.

He filed his federal suit in 2017, but it's taken nearly another two years for his highly-complex case — which has a claim of defamation, Fourth Amendment violations of search and seizure and the “conversion” or loss of his property — to reach a point where the issue of his research materials can hopefully be resolved.

For Wilson, the goal is to recoup as much as possible.

“In academia, you have an assumption of privacy. Your work and your research is sacrosanct. I have to tell you, it was traumatic, shattering and world changing what happened, and I never believed that it could and I certainly didn't think it would happen at CUNY,” Wilson told The News. “I amassed an incredible amount of documentary history on black workers...a treasure trove on some of the great and the unknown civil rights leaders.

“How it is possible that all this is going to be erased?”

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