

Jesus Called the Cops

Dena Clamage

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“The National Black Economic Development Conference (NBEDC) will in no way yield to threats of prosecution for non-existent crimes or other intimidation. On the contrary, we will continue to press our demands which are known to be just by all, including the religious industry and the U.S. Department of Justice.”

In this statement to the press issued July 1, the NBEDC, an organization which has demanded economic reparations for over 300 years of black slavery and oppression, reaffirmed its determination to resist the intimidation tactics of the federal Grand Jury investigation which it is now facing. It is reported that this Grand Jury is seeking evidence to support charges of inter-state conspiracy to extort money by force.

These charges are being leveled against the Conference on the basis that the NBEDC has demanded \$500,000,000 in reparations from the white Christian churches and Jewish synagogues. According to the NBEDC Manifesto, which was written in May of this year at the founding meeting of the group, the churches and synagogues are “part and parcel of capitalism” and “the exploitation of colored people around the world is aided and abetted by the white Christian churches and synagogues.”

The money collected is to be used for four television networks, four publishing and printing houses, a National Black Labor Strike and Defense Fund, a Southern Land Bank, and various other projects.

The demand for reparations from the churches has been backed up by militant demonstrations all over the country, including the demonstrations at Riverside Church in New York and Christ Church at Cranbrook. People Against Racism seized the Presbyterian Headquarters last month in support of the black demands.

Legally, it is the demand for reparations backed up by these forceful demonstrations which allegedly constitute the basis for any extortion or conspiracy to extort charge. However, according to Ronald Reosti, one of the NBEDC lawyers “The use of the extortion statute in this context would stretch the statute to the point of being meaningless. It doesn’t apply in this case.”

Politically, the justification for the investigation is a different matter. As Ken Cockrel, another Conference lawyer and a member of the Conference Steering Committee, runs it down, “Members of the Steering Committee of the NBEDC are involved in other movements. It would be naive for us to assume that other people are not aware of these activities. If they can use the pretext of busting the Conference to get these people, they will have accomplished a very important political effect.”

Specifically, James Forman, formerly International Affairs Director of SNCC, is a national leader of the Conference. Also, John Watson, Mike Hamlin, Chuck Wooten, Luke Tripp, and several other members of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers form the Detroit leadership of the NBEDC.

The Grand Jury investigation into the NBEDC started Monday, June 30, in the Federal Building on Lafayette. Due to the secret nature of Grand Jury procedure, the hearings have been held in a closed chamber with neither press nor spectators admitted. Supposedly, this is for the protection of persons appearing to give information on the subject under investigation. According to Cockrel, however, “Because the Grand Jury is secret, they can bring in all kinds of agents, liars and perjurers in order to get evidence for indictments.”

Besides the secrecy requirement, Conference lawyers argue that the Grand Jury violates Constitutional due process by excluding legal counsel for the subpoenaed witnesses and by not allowing the right of cross-examination of the witnesses.

Because of the unconstitutionality of the proceedings, on July 1 Conference attorneys introduced a motion to quash the subpoenas summoning witnesses to testify before the Grand Jury.

These witnesses included Rev. Robert Morrison of St. Joseph's Episcopal Church; Stu House, an ex-SNCC staffer now employed by the Pontiac Office of Economic Opportunity; Rennie Freeman, formerly of the West Central Organization, and a number of other Detroit area clergymen, laymen and militants.

The motion to quash was described as "an affirmative legal move designed to be an offensive step. No one is naive enough to think that the judge will grant the motion." He didn't.

The first witness to appear before the Grand Jury, Rev. Morrison, began by reading a statement of non-complicity with the Grand Jury. This statement included a rejection of both the procedure and the political content of the Grand Jury investigation. "I protest the secrecy of this investigation because this is a characteristic of a totalitarian society. Also, it is clear that someone has made a practical decision to destroy the NBEDC because it is a threat to the government and to this racist society."

After reading his statement, Morrison refused to answer any of the Grand Jury's questions on the basis of his Fifth Amendment rights. However, the Jury argued that since he had entered a statement, he had to answer all questions related to the statement, including questions on the politics of the NBEDC.

The Grand Jury is now examining the possibilities of bringing contempt of court charges against Morrison for his refusal to answer their questions. Morrison has been temporarily dismissed until July 10 when a hearing on the question of contempt will be held.

The investigation by the Grand Jury has not gone unnoticed by Detroit radicals. A demonstration has been held each day of the investigation, involving hundreds of people who are unwilling to sit passively by while this latest incident of repression goes down.

On July 2, the day of Morrison's testimony, about 200 people participated in the largest of these demonstrations, setting up a double picket line outside the Federal Building. Later the demonstrators moved to Kennedy Square for a rally at which Morrison described his experiences in the Jury chamber.

Also, Leon Atchison, Administrative Assistant to U.S. Congressman John Conyers, read a statement from Conyers on the investigation. "If anyone is guilty of extortion, it is President Nixon, who is trying to extort Uncle Tom behavior from blacks and trying to extort our legal rights from us. This whole thing is a perversion of justice, just like the Algiers Motel incident and the Rouge Park shooting."

The NBEDC and the Black Manifesto did not receive support from all forces in the black community. During the Federal Building picket line, Milton Henry, Vice-President of the Republic of New Africa, publicly denounced the NBEDC to the press in attendance at the demonstration.

Describing the Manifesto as "counterrevolutionary" and an example of "black capitalism," Henry asked, "When are black people going to stop talking about overthrowing the U.S. government and start talking about helping black people? Black men should forget about tearing down the white man's system and build his own."

Furthermore, Henry asserted, "Even if black people achieved everything contained in this Manifesto, they would „still be enslaved."

In spite of this disagreement, the NBEDC is prepared to continue pressing their demands and programs in the face of the Grand Jury investigation. As Ken Cockrel summed it up, "Just because Jesus Christ called the cops on us doesn't mean we're going to crawl into a hole and die."

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