

Corruption and greed in the name of “civil rights”

Jesse Jackson and the Chicago dance club tragedy

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The death of 21 people, mostly young and African-American, who perished in a stampede at a Chicago dance club in the early morning hours of February 17, was a terrible human tragedy. It was also one of those events that shed light on political and social realities normally concealed from the public eye—in this case, the longstanding and thoroughly corrupt relationship between the city’s so-called civil rights leaders, black entrepreneurs and the political establishment.

The stampede began when a fight broke out at about 2 a.m. at the E2 night club on the city’s South Side. The club was operating illegally and should never have been doing business that night.

Security guards reportedly used pepper spray on the crowd, and the burning mist set off a charge by patrons down the club’s steep, narrow staircase. Witnesses say other security guards blocked the door to the street for several minutes, and dozens of people were trampled underfoot. More than 50 were injured. It was the worst such incident in modern US history.

Soon after the tragedy, city attorneys reported that E2’s owners had been issued a court order last July barring the use of the second floor at 2347 S. Michigan Ave., where the dance party was held. But the club’s owner, Dwain J. Kyles, a long-time associate of the Rev. Jesse Jackson, kept the club open while city officials and police looked the other way.

Jackson showed up at the dance club within hours of the tragic stampede to extend his sympathies to the victims and their families. His presence at the scene, however, was principally aimed at defending Kyles and the web of enterprises exemplified by his business. Jackson’s son, Democratic Congressman Jesse Jackson Jr., also sprang to Kyles’ defense, describing him as

“an upstanding example of a young professional person in our community,” adding that “extending blame and pointing fingers is inappropriate and unnecessary before the first funeral has been held.” The city’s black ministers likewise warned against a “rush to judgment.”

The Jacksons have good reason to rally around the club’s owner, despite the fact that he was operating the facility illegally. Dwain Kyles is an active supporter of Jesse Jackson’s Rainbow/PUSH Coalition. He is a prominent member of a section of privileged blacks who have benefited from PUSH’s activities, which center around securing contracts and perks for minority entrepreneurs. Kyles has lobbied for the city and school board to use more minority contractors, and summed up his outlook in an interview in the *Chicago Daily Law Bulletin* in 1993: “I’m committed to the development of the entrepreneurial class in our community.”

Kyles is also closely connected to the city’s black political establishment, having contributed to the campaigns of many black politicians in the city—including Jesse Jackson, Jr.—and worked as a lawyer for Harold Washington, Chicago’s only black mayor.

In addition, Kyles’ South Side enterprise has connections to the Chicago police. His business partner, Calvin Hollins Jr., is a former sheriff’s deputy captain in the Southwest Side’s 22nd Ward. Hollins was convicted for killing a man outside another nightclub, but won a pardon in 1991. As a convicted felon, he should not have been involved in running E2, and the city now says the club’s liquor license should be revoked for this reason. Kyles’ association with Hollins is indicative of the type of social element involved in

the club's operation.

Jesse Jackson's relationship with Dwain Kyles goes back decades. In the early 1960s when Kyles was a young child, his father, Billy Kyles, headed the Memphis chapter of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and later opened an office of Jackson's Operation PUSH in the city. The elder Kyle and Jackson were with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. when he was assassinated in Memphis in 1968. Billy Kyles served as a national coordinator on Jackson's 1984 and 1988 presidential campaigns.

Jackson's long association with the Kyles family, however, has not served to advance the social conditions of black working people and youth in the city of Chicago, where PUSH is headquartered. Rather, it has been Kyle and other black entrepreneurs Jackson has helped foster who have been the privileged beneficiaries of Jackson's drive for minority business ownership.

Jackson and other sections of what passes for the official civil rights leadership in America have used affirmative action and racial preference campaigns as a means of benefiting a small minority of blacks, while the overwhelming majority of African-Americans continue to struggle for survival in the face of chronic economic insecurity, and millions remain locked in grinding poverty.

The operation of the E2 night club is particularly illustrative of how Dwain Kyle and other members of this social layer have benefited from their relationship with the so-called civil rights establishment in Chicago. On the first floor of the building housing the E2 hip-hop club is the Epitome restaurant, an upscale eatery catering in particular to the city's African-American elite. The building is the largest black-owned entertainment establishment in the city, and the restaurant is a frequent gathering spot for Chicago's black political leaders and entrepreneurs. The Epitome/E2 complex is one of the flagships of this "entrepreneurial class" in Chicago's black community, and Jesse Jackson has actively lobbied for its success.

One of most despicable aspects of the operation of Jackson and his milieu is the exploitation of the prestige of the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s for their own selfish and reactionary ends. In the name of defending minority business opportunities, Jackson has resorted to barely disguised extortion to

steer millions of dollars from Fortune 500 companies into the bank accounts of his friends and family members.

In 1999, Jackson opposed the merger of Ameritech and SBC Communications until Ameritech agreed to sell a portion of its cellular business to a minority owner. Ameritech sold it for \$3.3 billion to a partnership which includes one of Jackson's longtime friends, Chester Davenport.

In the early 1980s, Jackson organized a boycott of Anheuser-Busch, Inc. because the brewing company had no minority distributors. In 1998, Jackson's sons Yusef and Jonathan were awarded the exclusive rights to distribute the brewer's products in a section of Chicago's North Side. The Jackson family distributorship records sales of \$30 million to \$40 million annually.

The politics of Jackson, senior and junior, as well as the Kyles of this world, articulate their narrow and selfish interests. Racial and identity politics, glorification of the black businessman and, either implicitly or explicitly, the capitalist profit system itself are bolstered by their close ties to the Democratic Party. This is a thoroughly corrupt and grasping upper-middle-class layer, dependent for its wealth and privileges on its sponsors in corporate America and the capitalist state.



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