

Leadership of the Southern Poverty Law Center pushed out in #MeToo-style operation

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The leadership of the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), the prominent national civil rights organization based in Montgomery, Alabama, has been ousted over the last two weeks under murky circumstances.

The sudden firing of the 82-year-old co-founder of the SPLC, Morris Dees, was announced March 14 by SPLC President Richard Cohen over undisclosed allegations of racism and sexism. Dees has denied all allegations against him.

Founded in 1971, the SPLC made its name under the leadership of Dees by confronting white supremacists and other far right-wing groups in the 1980s and 1990s, winning million-dollar awards for victims in civil cases which put many groups out of business. The organization has closely tracked the growth of far-right forces, which it termed “hate groups,” in the United States for decades, raising warnings of a significant uptick following the election of President Donald Trump.

The turmoil caused by vague allegations of racism and sexual harassment have been met with exuberance by right-wing groups that have long opposed the work of the SPLC.

The few details that have been made public about Dees’ alleged behavior belie claims of a “systemic culture of racism and sexism” at the organization, as one CNN headline absurdly exclaimed.

Jason Brooks, a paralegal who worked in Montgomery in 2016, told the *New York Times* he once heard Dees state, “I like chocolate,” in the company of black women. Brooks explained that he took this to be a sexual innuendo. Dees denied ever making such a statement.

Dees told the *Times* that he had been the subject of a complaint in 2017 after he made a female employee feel uncomfortable when he “touched my hand across

the top of her shoulder” as he introduced himself. He then made a comment about her visible tattoos and noted that he also had a tattoo on his leg.

So far, no other purported instances of sexual or racial harassment by Dees have been made public.

Nonetheless, after carrying out the task of firing Dees, Cohen announced his resignation from the SPLC March 22. “Whatever problems exist at the SPLC happened on my watch, so I take responsibility for them,” Cohen, president of the organization since 2003, wrote in an email to staff.

Legal Director Rhonda Brownstein also announced that she would be leaving after more than three decades of employment.

Dees’ removal, followed by Cohen and Brownstein’s departures, is the outcome of an apparent operation precipitated by the resignation earlier this month of associate legal director Meredith Horton, the highest ranking African American attorney working at the SPLC. Horton had worked for the Democratic Party of Georgia on voter issues before going to work for the SPLC in June 2018.

According to the *New York Times*, twenty employees responded to Horton’s departure by signing a letter addressed to SPLC executives, warning that “allegations of mistreatment, sexual harassment, gender discrimination, and racism threaten the moral authority of this organization and our integrity along with it.” Another letter from employees followed, demanding an investigation into an alleged coverup of the allegations against Dees.

Significantly, Dees’ termination was followed by the announcement that Chicago-based attorney Tina Tchen had been hired to conduct a review of the SPLC’s workplace environment and policies.

Tchen is a prominent figure in the Democratic Party,

operating as a right-hand confidant for the Obamas. From 2009 to 2017, she worked in the White House first as Director of the Office of Public Engagement, then as an assistant to President Obama, chief of staff to Michelle Obama and Executive Director of the White House Council on Women and Girls. In 2016 she earned \$176,461, one of sixteen aides who earned the top pay for White House staffers.

Now a leading partner at Buckley LLP and co-founder of the Times Up Legal Defense Fund, Tchen is at the forefront of the reactionary #MeToo campaign. Tchen was hired by the Recording Academy to lead a “task force on inclusion and diversity” following the 2018 Grammy Awards to ensure “equity” in the distribution of awards to women and racial minorities.

No doubt there are financial considerations involved. In recent years, the SPLC has increased its endowment to \$470 million on the basis of a flood of donations since the election of Donald Trump. The group raised \$50 million in 2016, followed by \$132 million in 2017. Recent high-profile donations have come from Apple, JP Morgan, and George and Amal Clooney.

Bound up with conflicts over the control of the endowment are claims that the SPLC under Dees played up the danger of the far right in order to squeeze money out of donors. The argument that the SPLC is a scam operation, once the exclusive purview of the far-right forces that opposed its work, was given new life last week in the *New Yorker* by Bob Moser, a senior staff writer at the SPLC from 2001 to 2004.

Moser reacted approvingly to Dees’ ouster, enviously detailing the “gusher of donations” that have flowed into the organization since the election of Trump. It is revealing of the outlook of this layer to quote Moser at length:

For those of us who’ve worked in the Poverty Palace [a derisive nickname for the SPLC’s offices in Montgomery], putting it all into perspective isn’t easy, even to ourselves. We were working with a group of dedicated and talented people, fighting all kinds of good fights, making life miserable for the bad guys. And yet, all the time, dark shadows hung over everything: the racial and gender disparities, the whispers about sexual harassment, the abuses

that stemmed from the top-down management, and the guilt you couldn’t help feeling about the legions of donors who believed that their money was being used, faithfully and well, to do the Lord’s work in the heart of Dixie. We were part of the con, and we knew it.

Outside of work, we spent a lot of time drinking and dishing in Montgomery bars and restaurants about the oppressive security regime, the hyperbolic fund-raising appeals, and the fact that, though the center claimed to be effective in fighting extremism, “hate” always continued to be on the rise, more dangerous than ever, with each year’s report on hate groups. “The S.P.L.C.—making hate pay,” we’d say.

The idea that the danger from the far right has been overblown is ridiculous, especially in light of the recent developments, including the rampage of white supremacists in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017 and the fascist terrorist attack on two mosques in New Zealand. Trump has been encouraging the growth of the far right in the United States and all over the world.



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