

# Tuskegee University marching band members in Alabama protest lack of support for renowned music program

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Student members of the Marching Crimson Pipers (MCP) Band at Tuskegee University in Tuskegee, Alabama issued a statement addressed to the university administration, students and alumni on October 23 in which they announced that the band would “abjure its participation from all university-sponsored and organized social events until further notice.”

The statement, circulated by the university’s Student Government Association (SGA) on the day of the university’s homecoming football game, makes a forceful demand that due to “the blatant lack of resources, organization, and leadership needed to prosper, as an organization, measures must be taken in order to initiate the change we need.”

Founded in 1881 by Booker T. Washington as one of the “self-help” avenues African Americans could traverse under Jim Crow segregation, Tuskegee University is “one of 107 historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) nationally and the fourth-ranked HBCU nationally by U.S. News and World Report,” as publicized on the university’s website. The statement from the MCP Band does not shy from the fact that “Tuskegee is a privately funded institution making our cost to attend higher than a lot of other HBCUs.”

With the band considered “the life and blood of the University,” the institution’s President Charlotte P. Morris responded the same day that “We look forward to meeting with band leaders to discuss and respond to their concerns.” A meeting between band representatives and university officials took place on Monday, but no further details on that meeting have been published as of this writing.

Currently under the direction of John Q. Lennard, the band has gained an exceptional reputation since its founding in 1881 (then a part of the university’s military department), showcasing its signature “high-stepping” choreography across the country. It boasts of distinguished alumni, from the writer Ralph Ellison to several members of the popular funk and soul group, Commodores, including Lionel Richie.

These accomplishments, however, have not insulated the band program from the decades-long cuts to higher education, including funding for arts and humanities departments that have been overseen by both the Democratic and Republican parties

at every level of government. The statement by the MCP band is a reflection of this reality and the growing opposition by students and youth against it.

The statement reviews three key areas MCP members feel have been neglected and abused for long enough, and upon which they make their demands: leadership, funding and recruitment.

Under leadership, they state: “From the settings of rehearsal to vital performances, the band requires dependable staff who will not only guide us with strong leadership but who will also support us in the areas that we cannot support ourselves.” They demand “[s]ufficient salaries for band staff, coverage of travel costs, and fair scholarship funding for its qualified members, including auxiliary,” because these are “all vital expenses that play in part to the establishment and maintenance of an efficient collegiate band program.” This “area of concern goes hand and hand” with recruitment.

The protest by the MCP Band members comes amid the ongoing and worsening COVID-19 pandemic, which has sickened more than 100 people on campus and sparked protests by staff.

The Alabama Department of Public Health (ADPH) has so far tallied 2,416 cases and 63 deaths related to COVID-19 for Macon County (population 19,532), whose largest city is Tuskegee. The county is currently listed as having a “high” level of community transmission. Only 42 percent of the county’s population is fully vaccinated.

Alabama has the second-highest COVID-19 death rate in the country, just behind Mississippi, with 316 deaths per 100,000, and one of the worst infection rates. However, an indication that the state is not reporting all cases has come to light this week, with the ADPH announcing that during “the next two cycles of data entry, a large number of cases may be added to the Data and Surveillance Dashboard,” adding that many “cases will be from previous months.”

This has not prevented Tuskegee University from giving the green light to in-person learning this semester. The result has been that since July, the university’s COVID-19 Dashboard and Resource Center has tracked 118 positive cases, a number

that will undoubtedly rise before the semester's end due to the administration's continuation of athletic events such as the recent homecoming football game.

It is against this backdrop that the MCP Band's statement makes reference to the exploitation and lack of recognition its members have experienced. It states: "Oftentimes, we are asked to do things by the university, and we are not properly acknowledged or rewarded for our hard efforts. We feel as if we are just being exploited by the university and not recognized as an organization that functions within the university."

It continues: "Through our own individual research, we have found that we are one of the most underfunded programs on campus. We feel that is unacceptable, considering this is a program that operates year-round no matter the weather. We are asked to always be on call for whatever the university may need, yet we have broken instruments, a band hall that needs to be renovated, a lack of scholarship money, and a lack of staff needed to improve as a band."

The statement concludes: "We will no longer allow the inefficient operation of a program that we pour countless hours of energy into. We will no longer allow ourselves to be exploited simply on the basis that we 'signed up for it.' And we will no longer allow for the apathetic nature that has been granted to us, as we strive to not only hold our leadership accountable but our fellow band members both current and future."

Any argument that "there is no money" to adequately fund the university's band program is directly refuted by the reality of its private business dealings.

Serving as one of the many academic bulwarks for identity politics in the US, Tuskegee is the beneficiary of donations from multi-billionaire philanthropists, which have poured in especially in the aftermath of popular protests in 2020 over police violence triggered by the murder of George Floyd, as well as lucrative partnerships with state and Wall Street figures.

A partial list of donors and partners since July 2020 includes:

- MacKenzie Scott, formerly married to Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos, and the third-richest woman on the *Forbes* World's Billionaires List with a net worth of \$53 billion, who, according to the previous university president, Lily D. McNair, donated "the largest single gift in the university's history" (\$20 million).

- Apple, whose Community Education Initiative will make "America more competitive in the near future," according to current university president Morris.

- Stephen Feinberg, hedge fund manager and private equity billionaire (net worth \$2.4 billion), who established the Stephen Feinberg Scholarship Program with the university.

- The Cargill University THRIVE Program, one of the many projects of the largest privately owned company in the US, and one that is also a major purchaser of child slave-harvested cocoa beans in Africa, as revealed by a recent Supreme Court case.

- Google, which bestowed a \$5 million grant as a part of its identity politics-driven Pathways to Tech initiative.

One of the newest members of the university's Board of Trustees is Ray Whiteman, a prominent Wall Street figure with close ties to Citigroup and the Chase Manhattan Bank, along with ties to the Pentagon through his former board membership with US Marine Repair, now BAE Systems Ship Repair, the largest non-nuclear military ship repair and modernization company in the country.

The university administration also operates in lock-step with the imperialist demands of American capitalism. One of the most prominent reflections of this is the Tuskegee University Global Office (TUGO), which aims to instill in the younger generations that "[l]earning about the world, especially as it relates to improving our country's strategic advantage has become an important national security concern."

In order for their defense of art and culture to gain the momentum it deserves, student members of the MCP Band must not count on an inch being conceded in private talks with administrators and instead turn to their allies among the student body, who have already voiced widespread support on social media, and most importantly, to the working class.

This includes the university's sanitation workers, who in June last year protested daily outside City Hall during their regular work hours to demand pay increases and PPE; the coal miners at Warrior Met in Brookwood who have been battling both the company and the corrupt bureaucrats in the UMWA since going on strike last April; and the Amazon workers at the BHM1 fulfillment center in Bessemer.

Critical of all should be an immediate appeal to the teachers involved with the Alabama Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee. This committee is one of many associated with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), the newly established organizational framework aiming to unite the different sparks of the resurgent global strike movement into a conscious and independent political movement, one that can bring the COVID-19 pandemic and all its deleterious social effects to an end.



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