

A sordid fight over money between Black Lives Matter factions

Trévon Austin
15 September 2022

On September 1, 26 chapters of Black Lives Matter Grassroots filed a lawsuit in Los Angeles County Superior Court accusing the top executive of the Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation (BLMGNF) of illegally “siphoning” \$10 million in donation money.

In addition to denunciations of much of the BLMGNF leadership, the suit accuses Shalomyah Bowers, the head of BLMGNF, and his Bowers Consulting Firm of funneling millions of dollars from BLM’s coffers, using the organization as his own “personal piggy bank.”

The day after the lawsuit was filed, Melina Abdullah, co-founder of the BLM Los Angeles chapter and co-director of BLM Grassroots, held a press conference announcing the lawsuit, at which she claimed that Bowers pays himself upwards of \$2 million a year.

Following Abdullah’s press conference, the BLMGNF Board of Directors released an official statement denying the allegations against Bowers and other leaders and labeling the lawsuit “another round of struggle for ‘control’” of BLM. It called the allegations “slandorous and devoid of reality.”

The Board of Directors brought forward counterclaims against Abdullah and other BLM Grassroots leaders, alleging that they have been taking \$10,000 per month in personal stipends, going on secret retreats to Jamaica, and docking the pay of BLM operatives forced to take leave because they or a family member had contracted COVID-19.

The BLMGNF statement includes excerpts from a January 2022 letter from BLM Grassroots leaders detailing “countless allegations of Melina Abdullah’s financial malpractice, unprincipled decision making, and a leadership style rooted in retribution and intimidation.”

The controversy surrounding the lawsuit is only the latest in a long line of scandals involving BLM’s finances. Amid the popular protests against the brutal murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police in 2020, the bourgeois media and the Democratic Party promoted Black Lives Matter and its leaders as the official voice of the millions of all races and ethnicities demonstrating against police brutality. This

promotion was accompanied by official endorsements and large donations of cash from corporate America to BLM.

The families of victims of police brutality and many local activists, however, soon questioned BLM’s financial secrecy:

- Three months after 10 local BLM chapters published a November 2020 statement demanding greater financial accountability from BLMGNF directors, the organization publicly released information about its finances for the first time. It reported that BLMGNF had raised more than \$90 million in 2020, incurred \$8.4 million in operating expenses, distributed \$21.7 million in grants to more than 30 organizations, and retained some \$60 million.

- In March 2021, Lisa Simpson, the mother of 18-year-old Richard Risher, killed by Los Angeles police in 2016, and Samaria Rice, the mother of 12-year-old Tamir Rice, killed by Cleveland police in 2014, released a statement demanding that BLMGNF stop exploiting the deaths of their children to make money.

They wrote: “We don’t want or need y’all parading in the streets accumulating donations, platforms, movie deals, etc. off the death of our loved ones, while the families and communities are left clueless and broken. Don’t say our loved ones’ names, period! That’s our truth!”

- In April 2021, the *New York Post* revealed that Black Lives Matter co-founder and nominal head Patrisse Cullors and her wife had purchased four properties worth approximately \$3 million between 2016 and 2021. Less than two months after the news became public, Cullors resigned as executive director of BLMGNF, claiming she wanted to concentrate on other projects, including books and a production deal with Warner Bros.

- In April 2022, a *New York Magazine* report revealed that BLMGNF had purchased a \$6 million luxury home in southern California with donation money. According to the report, BLMGNF bought the 6,500 square-foot property, complete with seven bedrooms and bathrooms, a sound stage and music studio, a pool, and parking for almost 20 cars, in October 2020 to serve as a “safe-house” and headquarters

for BLM leadership to create social media content. In June 2021, Patisse Cullors, Alicia Garza and Melina Abdullah recorded a video outside the mansion to mark the first anniversary of George Floyd’s murder.

- In May 2022, the *Associated Press* published tax documents showing that BLMGNF paid out millions to entities controlled by relatives and close associates of then-Executive Director Cullors. BLM paid out \$25,997,945 in grants, including a \$2,167,890 payout to the Bowers Consulting Firm, owned by Shalomyah Bowers.

- Melina Abdullah, a professor of Pan-African studies at California State University Los Angeles and co-founder of Black Lives Matter LA, was featured in a Levi’s jeans “Beauty of Becoming” marketing campaign, despite the news that Levi’s contractor worked to kill a minimum wage bill in Haiti.

With each revelation, the fraudulent character of Black Lives Matter has become clearer and clearer. The organization lost credibility among millions of Americans who’d previously supported BLM under the impression those at the helm were genuine about a fight against police violence. The parasitic layers in the leadership were sent into crisis, prompting Cullors to resign as executive director in June 2021. Since then, virtually every news story about Black Lives Matter has involved a scandal.

According to the lawsuit filed by Black Lives Matter Grassroots, Bowers was originally hired by Cullors to help run BLMGNF in 2020. Melina Abdullah claims that when Cullors decided to step down as executive head of BLMGNF, she left Bowers with a transition plan to hand over control of the BLMGNF to the BLM Grassroots leadership.

According to the lawsuit, Cullors appointed two BLM members, Monifa Bandele and Makani Themba, as co-senior executives to oversee the transition, while Bowers remained in his administrative role. But Bowers allegedly failed to follow Cullors’ transition plan and BLM Grassroots was denied access to BLMGNF’s social media accounts.

“This is the case of a rogue administrator, a middleman, turned usurper, who was hired to collect donations and account for expenditures of the Black Lives Matter movement,” the lawsuit reads.

While claiming that Bowers sees BLMGNF as his personal “piggy bank,” the suit further alleges that Bowers’ activities were the catalyst for the series of fraud investigations launched by state and federal authorities into BLMGNF’s finances, which BLM Grassroots claims paved “a path of irreparable harm to BLM in less than eighteen months.”

As part of its counterclaims against Abdullah and BLM Grassroots, BLMGNF cited letters that BLM Grassroots allegedly sent in January over concerns about Abdullah’s

leadership.

One complaint alleging Abdullah’s mishandling of a \$7 million budget reads:

“I’m writing to you today with some serious concerns about the management and operations of Black Lives Matter Grassroots... It is my view that the Black Lives Matter Grassroots team, of which I am a part, is ill-equipped at this time to run and manage a multi-million dollar organization.”

In an article discussing BLM’s multiple financial scandals, the *World Socialist Web Site* explained the true character of the organization:

The facts that have emerged demonstrate that Black Lives Matter is largely a creation of the corporate media and the Democratic Party, not a genuine expression of insurgent popular opposition to the pervasive brutality and social inequality of American society. The revelations illustrate the venal and privileged social layers whose interests are expressed by the elevation of race, rather than class, as the essential dividing line in society.

Beyond exposing the venal and selfish character of the BLM leadership, the latest allegations lay bare the reactionary character of racial politics and the right-wing social interests it serves. For all of their talk of the “fight for Black liberation,” the layers behind BLM have nothing in common with—and are hostile to—the masses of workers and youth of all races who are coming into struggle against capitalism.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact