

Racism and Injustice in America: National Defense Campaign Building for Rev. Edward Pinkney

Activists around the United States are angered over racial injustice in southwest Michigan

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Michigan political prisoner Rev. Edward Pinkney is now being held in Jackson state prison. He remains in good spirits despite the racist injustice that has landed him in detention over manufactured claims that he changed the dates on five signature entries on a recall petition designed to remove Benton Harbor Mayor James Hightower.

During the course of the trial there was no material or circumstantial evidence presented that would implicate Pinkney in the purported five felonies. Many believe that the Berrien County activist and leader of the Black Autonomy Network Community Organization (BANCO) is being punished by the local authorities for opposing the corporate program of Whirlpool Corp. which is headquarters in Benton Harbor.

In 2012, Pinkney and BANCO led an “Occupy the PGA” demonstration against the world-renown golf tournament that was held at the newly-created Jack Nicklaus Signature Golf Course on Lake Michigan. The course was carved out of Jean Klock Park which had been donated to the City of Benton Harbor decades ago.

Berrien County officials were determined to defeat a recall campaign against Mayor Hightower of Benton Harbor who opposed a program to tax local corporations in an effort to create jobs and improve conditions in the majority African American municipality. Benton Harbor, like other Michigan cities, has been devastated by widespread poverty and unemployment.

Statements of Support Pour In

This is not the first time that Pinkney has been imprisoned for his political activities. In 2007 he was convicted in a second trial, with the first ending in a hung jury, for “mishandling” absentee ballots during a recall election involving two Benton Harbor City Commissioners. The results of the elections removing the officials were overturned after criminal charges were filed against the BANCO leader.

Pinkney was sentenced to one year under house arrest and four more years of probation. Later in 2007, he was charged with violating his terms of the sentence for allegedly threatening a judge in Berrien County.

The threat charge stemmed from an article he wrote in the People’s Tribune newspaper based in Chicago where he quoted scriptures from the Old Testament. He was ordered imprisoned for three to ten years.

The charges were overturned in late 2008 by the Michigan Appeals Court after the activist received widespread support from the civil liberties, ecumenical and academic communities across the country. He was released at the end of 2008 and successfully completed his probation returning to full-time activism in Berrien County.

Pinkney in 2008 from his prison cell ran for United States Congress on the Green Party ticket in Michigan. He received 3,500 votes in a challenge to Fred Upton, a Republican congressman and heir to the Whirlpool corporate dynasty.

In a statement issued by Green Party Watch it says that “The overt targeting of an African-American activist for a politically-motivated prosecution is reminiscent of recent episodes involving Chuck Turner and Elston McCowan, both Greens who challenged the power structures in their communities. In a system where police officers regularly kill unarmed African-American men without facing trial, it is especially galling that the same system sentences an African-American activist to up to 10 years imprisonment on trumped-up, politically-motivated charges.” (Dec. 17)

Black Agenda Report, a well-known media outlet opposing the corporate influence over African American politics in the U.S., wrote in an editorial that

“This may seem like an Old Jim Crow story, about a preacher from a small, mostly Black town who wanted only to help his people through the voting process, but is set upon by backward whites determined to maintain their monopoly on political power. And, it is true; Old Man Jim Crow is alive and well on the banks of Lake Michigan.” (Dec. 17)

This same editorial goes saying “But it is the New Jim Crow, the Mass Black Incarceration State, that has snatched 66 year-old Rev. Pinkney away to what could become life in prison. The judge and prosecutor said that Pinkney’s 12 past and present felony convictions make him a career criminal, even though each count stems from an elections process. The Old Jim Crow would have unapologetically sent Pinkney to the chain gang for being an uppity Black man, but the New Jim Crow simply piled on a bunch of felonies to put him away as a serial criminal, allowing the system to claim that race had nothing to do with it.”

A national conference call was held on Thurs. Dec. 18 designed to build a defense campaign. Former Vermont State Senator Ben-Zion Ptashnik initiated the call through the People Demanding Action (PDA) organization.

The conference call included activist members of the clergy, electoral reform organizers, former Green Party candidates, progressive Democrats, the People’s Tribune newspaper, Moratorium NOW! Coalition, and others. The call provided an update on the case, plans to publicize the plight of Rev. Pinkney and the people of Berrien County, recruiting a legal team and a fundraising drive to proceed with an appeal.

Ptashnik and Victorial Collier wrote in Truth-out.org on Dec. 16 that “Concerned activists and clergy associated with People Demanding Action, a national social justice organization, are circulating a petition to ministers and various organizations. The petition is to be forwarded to the U.S. Justice Department and Attorney General Eric Holder, asking for an investigation into the circumstances of Pinkney’s trial and sentencing.

To sign the petition in support of Rev. Edward Pinkney log on to:

http://salsa.wiredforchange.com/o/6405/c/10113/p/dia/action3/common/public/?action_KEY=10735

Contributions for the defense of Rev. Pinkney can be sent to BANCO at 1940 Union Street, Benton Harbor, Michigan 49022.

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