

The lucrative business of “fighting hate”

In-house bigotry rocks Southern Poverty Law Center

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The opulent headquarters of the Southern Poverty Law Center in Montgomery, Alabama. PHOTO: SPLC

Charges of racism and sexual harassment have brought down Morris Dees, the co-founder of the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), once considered a premier civil rights organization. To many, the Center is a legal powerhouse countering white supremacists, assorted neo-Nazis and the KKK. But its squeaky clean façade hides a sordid secret: it is an organization rife with internal discrimination which has amassed a small fortune taking bigots to court.

The downfall. Headquartered in Montgomery, Alabama, in an imposing glass building known as “The Poverty Palace,” SPLC publishes widely-cited national statistics on “hate” groups in its *Intelligence Report*, hawks pricey *Teaching Tolerance* kits, and wins enormous legal settlements against ultra-right proponents.

In March, a staff revolt over the resignation of a prominent Black woman attorney led to Dees’ firing. SPLC employees charged the center with a longstanding pattern of institutionalized “sexual harassment, gender discrimination, and racism.” They accused center management of covering up complaints against 82-year-old Dees, who they claimed ruled like a monarch and could not keep his hands to himself.

Master fundraiser. Dees, a southerner, has an unusual background for a civil rights leader. He first made a fortune in direct marketing sales while practicing law on the side. And in 1961, he represented a Klansman who had beaten up Freedom Riders.

Ten years later, Dees and Montgomery attorney Joe Levin co-founded SPLC and invited civil rights luminary Julian Bond to be president.

In 1987, Dees rocketed to fame with a highly touted \$7 million judgment against the United Klans of America. The case established the Center's fundraising model: the plaintiff in this case, a Black mother whose son was lynched, netted \$51,875 while the Center brought in \$9 million from fearmongering solicitations.

For Dees, "anti-hate" became a cash cow. "We just run our business like a business," Dees told the *The Progressive* in 1988, "Whether you're selling cakes or causes, it's all the same."

Over the years, newspaper exposés charged that SPLC hyped its hate crime statistics and targeted high-profile legal cases to maximize donations. Former employees called it cashing in on "Black pain and white guilt."

Trump's election was a bonanza for Dees. In 2018 alone, \$136 million in donations boosted the Center's endowment to \$471 million.

"He's the Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker of the civil rights movement," said former associate and anti-death penalty lawyer Millard Farmer, "though I don't mean to malign Jim and Tammy Faye."

Cashing in on the Northwest. The SPLC litigates primarily in the South. But in the 1990s, Dees charged into the Pacific Northwest, drawn by an international spotlight on communities organizing against neo-Nazis.

In 1988, Mulugeta Seraw, an Ethiopian immigrant, was murdered by skinheads belonging to White Aryan Resistance (WAR) in Portland, Oregon. Shortly after, the United Front Against Fascism (UFAF) formed in Seattle.

UFAF, which the Freedom Socialist Party and Radical Women helped found and lead, championed mass, direct counter-protest of white supremacists and built a formidable movement.

In 1990, SPLC sued WAR leader Tom Metzger over Seraw's death. At the initiative of Adrienne Weller, a UFAF supporter, Portlanders planned a March for Human Dignity to be held near the courthouse the day before the trial began. Dees demanded the march be moved, but a massive crowd turned out on the appointed day generating public pressure that helped win a conviction. Metzger was bankrupted and Dees used "his" victory for more fundraising.

Ten years later, Dees found another high-profile Northwest target — the Aryan Nations. An anti-Semitic, white supremacist group, it staged several parades in the '90s in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, with swastika-emblazoned flags flying high.

UFAF ensured that each parade was greeted by a protest of loud civil rights defenders. The group's strategy of community mobilizations was making headlines and winning public support. UFAF successfully countered the bad tactics pushed by business owners, such as ignoring the ultra-bigots and relying on the law to tame them.

Then in 2000, the SPLC sued Aryan Nations founder Rev. Richard Butler and three followers over an armed assault. The \$6.3 million award forced the group to sell its headquarters and disband. Once again SPLC capitalized on the publicity and the money rolled in.

A self-serving perspective. The Center's many problems were an open secret for years. So how did Dees maintain SPLC's outsized reputation? He pandered to rich liberals and, in turn, the reformist establishment protected the Center. They welcomed an entity that restricted the fight for justice to the passivity of the collection plate.

SPLC doesn't ruffle the feathers of the corporate elite with talk of fascism's roots in capitalism. The Center prefers to call the fascist hornet's nest "*hate*" by both the right and the left. Its staff advocates civil suits, not community organizing; tolerance, not solidarity and mutual respect; diversity, not affirmative action.

There is a major problem with this approach: *hate is not the problem and love is not the answer*. Fascism and white nationalism are political movements aimed at dividing the working class in order to take state power. Such movements arise in a time of capitalist crisis and can only be defeated by a counter movement that is based in the working class — multi-racial, and ready to defend all the oppressed.

The lesson of turning the fight for justice into a money-making enterprise is that it undermines working class community organizing, the real engine of all social change.

Non-profits, operated like businesses, are not the solution to any problem. They are stop-gap measures which often stray from their stated goals.

The shame is that for the good it has done, SPLC and Dees have done serious damage.

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