

## The Shocking Turmoil at the SPLC

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“... UNTIL JUSTICE ROLLS DOWN LIKE WATERS ...” – MLK, Jr.

The announcement was stunning – and cryptic.

Just below Dr. King’s stirring language on the header of the website of the Southern Poverty Law Center, Richard Cohen had posted a confirmation of breaking news reports that same day, March 14, 2019: “Our founder Morris Dees is no longer working at SPLC.”

Continuing a few brief paragraphs down, the president of SPLC wrote: “We’re committed to ensuring that our workplace embodies the values we espouse — truth, justice, equity, and inclusion. When one of our own fails to meet those standards, no matter his or her role in the organization, we take it seriously and must take appropriate action.”

When you click on that link today, you’ll notice that Mr. Cohen is now listed as “former president” of SPLC. He stepped down from his post on March 22, 2019, a week after the firing of Morris Dees. The legal director, Rhonda Brownstein, “also resigned (around the same time) although the reason for her departure is not yet clear.”

Apparently – for decades – there had been a cauldron of tension and discontent brewing just under the surface at one of the nation’s leading civil rights organizations. “The firing of Morris Dees ... has flushed up uncomfortable questions that have surrounded the organization for years,” wrote former SPLC employee, Bob Moser, in *The Reckoning of Morris Dees and the Southern Poverty Law Center* (3/21/19), a stinging expose in *The New Yorker*.

This unraveling of a high-profile American charity, that had for so long aggressively promoted a pristine public image while hiding a toxic workplace culture (and other problems), is eerily reminiscent of another recent philanthropy scandal, the implosion of the Silicon Valley Community Foundation (SVCF) in April 2018.

Then – as now — the question is how and why this situation was allowed to go on for so long. While the Silicon Valley Community Foundation mess festered for almost ten years, the SPLC troubles were much more long-standing.

## *The Rise of the SPLC*

Morris Dees, now age 82, had long been the flamboyant **public face of the organization** he founded in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1971, with Joseph J. Levin, Jr., his law partner, and the late Julian Bond, a prominent young civil rights leader.

The organization was created to “ensure that the **promise of the civil rights movement** became a reality for all.” Mr. Bond, who died in 2015, served as SPLC’s **first board president** during the 1970s. He was also an accomplished state legislator and eventually led the NAACP. Joseph Levin is **still listed on the website’s board of directors** page as a co-founder with “board emeritus” status.

At the time he was fired, Mr. Dees’s official position had been “chief trial counsel” although in recent years, he **had stepped back somewhat** from his earlier prominence in the organization. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center’s most recent Form 990, he was still being paid over \$400,000 a year. On March 14, 2019, SPLC “scrubbed” his bio from the website.

Richard Cohen (now former president) earned several thousand dollars less while officially leading the organization since 2003. He had joined the group in 1986.

As a “legal advocacy organization specializing in civil rights and public interest litigation, [the SPLC] is known for its successful legal cases against white supremacist groups, its classification of hate groups and other extremist organizations, and for promoting tolerance education programs.”

“The SPLC has been engulfed in controversy for decades on everything from its fundraising practices to its designation of certain organizations as hate groups over which there has been litigation.”

Mr. Dees **reportedly crushed**, in a heavy handed manner, a proposed, highly critical article about him. Other stories and rumors about his personal behavior and an alleged corporate culture of racial discrimination and sexual harassment were also squashed.

## *The Facade at SPLC Cracks*

The dizzying cascade of activities in March 2019 just before and after the abrupt dismissal of Morris Dees on the 14th are beginning to come into focus. It is “being characterized as a situation of workplace harassment, hostile workplace complaints and a lack of staff diversity.”

What appears to have **prompted the abrupt actions on that day** was a group letter by staff members sent around that time that indicated they had had enough. The signers “noted the small number of black people in leadership ranks and that many employees had observed that people of color had been ‘pushed out, fired, removed from positions of leadership’ or had to leave ‘due to discrimination and a lack of opportunities.’”

Earlier in the month, Meredith Horton, the deputy legal director and among the highest-ranking African-American women in the center's history, announced she planned to leave. In a resignation announcement, she wrote that there was "more work to do" to guarantee that the SPLC was "a place where everyone is heard and respected and where the values we are committed to pursuing externally are also being practiced internally." Mr. Cohen forwarded Ms. Horton's resignation email to the entire staff. He wrote that executives intended to "ensure that our workplace reflects our values."

**"After the center announced** that it had fired Morris Dees, its charismatic co-founder, for misconduct, another group of employees sent a separate letter accusing the center's leadership of being 'complicit in decades of racial discrimination, gender discrimination, and sexual harassment and/or assault.'"

Notably, in Richard Cohen's March 22nd email to staff titled "Stepping Down," he wrote: "After more than 30 years at the Southern Poverty Law Center, I've decided to step down. Other legacy civil rights organizations have transitioned to a new generation of leaders, and I **believe that we should**, too."

His email statement continued: "We've heard from our staff that we need to do a better job of making sure that our workplace embodies the values we espouse — truth, justice, equity, and inclusion." He mentioned, also, that "back in October [2018], he had "asked the board to immediately launch a search for an interim president...."

## *The Future of the SPLC*

By the beginning of April 2019, there were a number of important developments including the resignation of Richard Cohen. Tina Tchen, former White House chief of staff to First Lady Michelle Obama, was hired to review the organization's workplace policies. In a statement released by the SPLC, Tchen was quoted saying: "Every workplace, including social justice organizations, must work hard to create a workplace culture that fully reflects their values and priorities, including when it comes to racial and gender diversity."

On April 2, 2019, the SPLC board chair announced that Karen Baynes-Dunning, an African-American, had been **named interim president and CEO** by unanimous vote of the board. "A former juvenile court judge, [she] has dedicated her career to improving the quality of life for the disadvantaged," having "served in numerous leadership positions in the public and nonprofit sector to help improve the policies and services that affect the lives of vulnerable children."

## *Conclusion*

As the story unfolds about the sad and highly ironic presence of a toxic workplace environment at a civil rights organization, there are legitimate questions including how the board and senior staff at the Southern Poverty Law Center allowed this to begin and then to fester for so long. This is particularly important to discuss since, apparently, these problems were more or less an open secret at least in some legal and philanthropy circles.