

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere” – Rev. Dr. Martin Luther, King, Jr.

Recent events have alarmed the collective political action and C4 committees of the five National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) fraternities listed below. Together, we denounce the rejection of Dr. Robert P. Taylor as state superintendent of education by the Republican-led Mississippi State Senate along with the expulsion of Reps. Justin Pearson and Justin Jones from the Republican-led Tennessee House of Representatives.

Since Reconstruction, it has been the aspiration of Black Americans to be accorded full citizenship rights and to receive equal treatment under the law. This also includes achieving economic security and having equal access to opportunity. It is our collective belief that there is a partisan movement afoot in this country to systemically disfranchise Black Americans and return the United States to an era of White supremacy. Recent events in Mississippi and Tennessee represent the latest in a series of maneuvers by the Republican Party to reinstate the political and social subordination of Black people through deceptive political practices and abuse of legislative authority and the law.

Dr. Robert P. Taylor was selected as Mississippi’s Superintendent of Education after a nationwide search was conducted by the state Board of Education and in November of 2022, the state Board announced Dr. Taylor as their unanimous selection. The rejection of Dr. Taylor is a stark departure from past practices when the state Senate has confirmed all previous nominees for state superintendent recommended by the state Board of Education. We find the state Senate’s behavior appalling and can only attribute it to the matter of Dr. Taylor’s race.

A native of Mississippi, Dr. Robert Taylor earned his undergraduate degree at the University of Southern Mississippi. He is a son of the South who has been an educational professional in the state of North Carolina for 30 years. The state Board of Education, in its expression of unanimous support of his selection, confirmed that Dr. Taylor was qualified for the position. Dr. Taylor would have only been the state’s second Black superintendent in Mississippi’s history. It is why we agree with the sentiment of state Senator Derrick Simmons who is quoted in the press in reference to the failure of the state Senate to confirm Dr. Taylor.

“Dr. Taylor did everything that we tell people in the state of Mississippi to do — get a good education, try to use that good education, go out and get your experience and then come back to the state of Mississippi and give Mississippi all of your educational talents and all of your educational experience and give back to the community that gave to you.”

Given the confirmation process history in the Mississippi Senate, we can only conclude that a non-African-America candidate with similar qualifications as Dr. Taylor would have been confirmed. This is unacceptable in 2023. Sixteen Democrats and five Republicans voted to confirm Dr. Taylor. Thus, we recognize that Dr. Taylor received some bipartisan support for his confirmation and find it inexplicable that the Chairman Dennis DeBar of the Senate Education Committee allowed this travesty of a denial vote by some of his Republican colleagues.

We are equally outraged by the treatment of Reps. Justin Jones and Justin Pearson, two young Black legislators who were expelled from the Republican-controlled Tennessee House of Representatives for simply exercising their First Amendment rights. These two young men were expelled under the false pretense of provoking an insurrection and violating the rules of decorum in the Tennessee House of

Representatives when their only ‘offense’ was giving voice to the frustration of Tennesseans over the failure of the legislature to address the Covenant School shooting that claimed six lives including three children. Republicans in the ‘people’s house’ are seemingly angrier at their colleagues for representing the concerns of the people of Tennessee than they are over gun violence that killed children and traumatized a school community. The fact that these two legislators were expelled, while a White colleague (Rep. Gloria Johnson, who also peacefully objected to the legislature’s inaction), was spared expulsion demonstrates this is clearly an act of racial retaliation.

Comments by the Republican leader of the House likening the peaceful protest of Reps. Jones, Pearson, and Johnson to the January 6, 2021 insurrection at the United States Capitol, reveals the intentional deception that has become a regular practice of the GOP. There is not a shred of truth in that comparison, and it is being proffered to sow division and create a false equivalency that can be incorporated in a narrative to further mislead the public.

In 2023, we can no longer allow lies and deception to stand as truth and concede the leadership of our states and nation to individuals whose only intent is to marginalize Black lives and lead by dictatorial rule. In his remarks, Rep. Justin Pearson correctly reflected on the hypocrisy of his and Rep. Jones’ expulsion and reminded us of the history of racial discrimination in the state of Tennessee. These two young men represent a generation we had hoped would be untouched and not stained by racism. Yet we find ourselves in the 21st Century fighting battles we fought at the conclusion of the Civil War.

Despite our frustration and disappointment, we remain steadfast and resolute in claiming our rightful place in this nation. No amount of trickery, shenanigans or deception will deter us from receiving what we have earned and fought for as citizens in this country. Our voices must be heard loud and clear that this form of state government will not be allowed to quiet the voices of the underserved communities.

We stand united in our collective outrage and disappointment over the treatment of Dr. Robert P. Taylor and urge the Mississippi State Senate to abide by the recommendation of the State Board of Education by reconsidering Dr. Taylor’s appointment. We also support Tennessee legislators Reps. Justin Jones and Justin Pearson and applaud the decisions of the Nashville Municipal Council and Shelby County Commission to return Rep. Jones and Rep. Pearson to the Tennessee House of Representatives. We will work with our associated memberships to support the re-election of both legislators from Memphis and Nashville.

Our organizations stand on the words of poet William Cullen Bryant that were famously echoed by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “truth, crushed to earth, shall rise again.”

