

PRESS ADVISORY

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90 Organizations Call for Attorney General Chris Carr to Drop RICO Indictment of Stop Cop City Protesters and Organizers

On September 5, 2023, the Georgia Attorney General's office handed down an indictment of 61 Stop Cop City protesters, organizers, and 2020 racial justice advocates. The indictment alleges a conspiracy to violate the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act (RICO). Now, 90 organizations who depend on the First Amendment in some way to do their work - from press freedom organizations to bail funds - have signed a letter calling on Attorney General Carr to drop the charges.

They write:

If successfully prosecuted, the indictment could set a precedent for criminalizing the type of movement building that civil rights, labor, and other movements have traditionally engaged in to effect social change...By the logic of this indictment, every movement for social change would be a target for criminalization...

The RICO charges are consistent with other prosecutorial decisions to intimidate the political movement into silence through overcharging, selective prosecution, and lack of predictability. As in previous local decisions to charge protesters who might otherwise face only minor charges with domestic terrorism, charges under RICO represent selective use of rarely invoked statutes to intimidate activists and silence political dissent.

The full letter is available at [this link](#).

Defending Rights & Dissent initiated the letter. Signatories to the letter are prominent national organizations including Amnesty International USA, the Freedom of the Press Foundation, PEN America, the Center for Constitutional Rights, the First Amendment Coalition, the Movement for Black Lives, and Greenpeace. State and local organizations from across the country also signed on, including many organizations from Texas and Ohio.

Organizations signing on cited free speech concerns, intimidation of protesters, and potential for broader ripple effects of the prosecution.

“The Cop City RICO indictment is intended to make the risk of protesting intolerably high. By alleging that providing financial support, doing public outreach, and engaging in civil disobedience is a racketeering conspiracy, Attorney General Carr wages war against movement building and political organizing.” said **Cody Bloomfield, Communications Director of Defending Rights & Dissent**. “Anyone who cares about constitutional rights should be

troubled, and rescinding RICO charges should be but one step towards defending the right to protest against an ongoing legislative and prosecutorial onslaught.”

“The RICO charges are another attempt by elected officials to criminalize movement organizers who are opposed to Cop City.” said **Kamau Franklin, founder of the Atlanta-based organization Community Movement Builders**. “The only conspiracy here is the one between the state and the city to unjustly charge organizers.”

"As longtime advocates for human rights defenders in the U.S. South and the Global South, we have seen countless attempts by corrupt state actors and their corporate abettors to criminalize social movements and protest activity," stated **Jessica Vosburgh, Senior Staff Attorney at the Center for Constitutional Rights**. "But this indictment takes it to a new level--one that is both ludicrous and terrifying. Attorney General Carr has fabricated an expansive racketeering conspiracy from a jumble of scraps--a zine encountered on the forest floor, a flyer posted on a mailbox, reimbursements for bathrooms for a public event in a park--almost all of which are protected by the First Amendment."

“We condemn in the strongest possible terms this absurdly grotesque abuse of the criminal legal system by the Attorney General's office,” said **Justin Mazzola, researcher with Amnesty International USA**. “The filing of state anti-racketeering, money laundering and domestic terrorism charges is intended solely to criminalize and silence a movement and violates these individuals' rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. Amnesty International stands in solidarity with others working to protect these rights and call on authorities to withdraw these charges and open an investigation into this flagrant abuse of overbroad and vague statutes that could potentially put protesters in jail for decades.”

“A RICO indictment that cites everything from talking to journalists to recording police to distributing literature as proof of some nebulous "conspiracy" should alarm all who care about press freedom, especially at a time when authorities are already weaponizing ambiguous laws from the Espionage Act to the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act against journalists and their sources,” stated **Seth Stern, Director of Advocacy at the Freedom of the Press Foundation**. “This indictment makes a mockery of the First Amendment and the entire criminal justice system.”

Several letter signers commented on the need for solidarity amid political repression.

“Defending Rights & Dissent won't stand by while Attorney General Carr continues to wage his war against legitimate political organizing, nor will the nearly 100 organizations from across the country who have signed this letter,” said **Sue Udry, Executive Director of Defending Rights & Dissent**. “We will continue to call out his wholly unconstitutional effort to silence dissent, we will organize, educate, and protest. You cannot silence a movement, Mr. Carr.”

“It's important that orgs alike, support and stand in solidarity with each other no matter where we are,” stated **Stacey Little, Co-Director of the Central Ohio Freedom Fund**, a Black-led bail

fund. “We know the RICO charges are absurd and this is one of the many ways our oppressors stop us from fighting against oppression. This is nothing new, and quite frankly it's insulting to the people we are fighting for everyday.”

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