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LDF Condemns Tennessee House's Retaliatory Expulsion of Two Black Lawmakers

On Thursday, the Tennessee House voted on a resolution to expel three members of the House for their involvement in a demonstration for gun control policies, following the recent killings of three children and three adults in a mass shooting at a school in Nashville, Tennessee. Two of the members, Representatives Justin Pearson and Justin Jones, both of whom are Black, were expelled from the House Thursday night, while Rep. Gloria Johnson (D) – who also participated in the demonstrations – was spared expulsion by one vote.

LDF President and Director-Counsel, Janai S. Nelson, issued the following statement in response:

“The racial and democratic implications of last night’s upheaval in the Tennessee legislature are undeniable and extremely disturbing. We condemn in no uncertain terms the expulsion of state Reps. Justin Jones and Justin Pearson, two young, Black legislators who were elected by constituents from predominantly Black and Brown communities in Nashville and Memphis to stand as their representatives in the state’s halls of power and decision-making. These lawmakers, along with Rep. Gloria Johnson, a white woman, were targeted by the Republican-led House for expulsion for amplifying their communities’ urgent call for gun control. After a majority vote by House, which in the case of Jones cleaved along racial and partisan lines, only the two Black lawmakers were pushed out of their duly elected roles. The Black and Brown communities represented by Pearson and Jones are now without representation in the state House.

“Let us be clear: the sham trial in the Tennessee House against all three lawmakers, and the usurping of the will of Black and Brown voters in the state, stains our democracy and shames the legislators behind this targeted act. We must all condemn this undemocratic, racial retaliation that eerily resembles post-Reconstruction era tactics to disempower Black communities in our bodies of government.

“And we must also roundly condemn and reject efforts in Tennessee and across the country to overturn the choices of majority-Black localities. The Tennessee legislature is currently considering a measure, SB 0591, that would override the will of voters in Nashville by abolishing community oversight boards for police. In Mississippi, St. Louis, Baltimore and Washington D.C., there have been similar troubling moves to overturn local decisions regarding police accountability. This convergence of attacks on the autonomy and choices of historically marginalized communities is unacceptable. The attempts to sideline the voices of Black citizens in our democracy cannot stand. In the words of LDF’s founder Thurgood Marshall, who went on to become the first Black Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States, “This is our democracy. Make it. Protect it. Pass it on.”

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