

Mr. Carmen A. Trutanich  
Los Angeles City Attorney's Office  
200 North Main Street, 8th Floor  
Los Angeles, CA 90012

October 24th, 2011

Re: National alarm regarding your office's prosecution of human rights defenders

Dear Mr. Trutanich:

As national organizations dedicated to advancing and protecting the rights guaranteed by the United States Constitution and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, we are deeply dismayed to learn of your office's ongoing pattern of severely prosecuting grassroots activists for acts of non-violent protest.

The signatories of this letter represent a collective breadth and depth of experience supporting the work of civil and human rights defenders over the course decades of political movements. Many of us have a long history of defending the right of members of civil and human rights movements to political expression and challenging the targeting of these movements' leaders.

Today, we write this letter to express our sincerest concerns regarding your office's apparent policy regarding non-violent political protests, as made particularly evident in the case of Mr. Steve "General Dogon" Richardson. As you likely know, Mr. Richardson is a prominent community organizer with the Los Angeles Community Action Network (LA CAN) who, over the past 16 months, has been booked, processed and jailed four times on the same troubling charges arising out of one non-violent act of protest. Your office has doggedly pursued this individual case and has mischaracterized Mr. Richardson on several occasions in your advocacy for greater punishment.

The following facts lead us to believe that the prosecution of Mr. Richardson is, in fact, a political attack on Mr. Richardson and LA CAN. On May 21, 2010, Mr. Richardson was arrested after a City Council meeting at which the important issue of a rent increase freeze was to be voted on by the Council. Though all charges were initially dropped, they were later re-filed against Mr. Richardson after he had, as a protest for the violence he was subject to on May 21, publicly rejected a violence prevention certificate awarded to him by the city. Mr. Richardson was the only protester targeted for prosecution, although there were dozens of others involved in the non-violent protest.

We understand that Mr. Richardson's case is not an anomaly, but one example of a pattern of acts by your office and the LAPD that appear intent on silencing the grassroots movement swelling throughout the city of Los Angeles. We believe LA CAN and Mr. Richardson, in particular, have been made targets because of the highly visible advocacy work the organization is doing in the Skid Row community of downtown Los Angeles. LA CAN and its over 900 low-income members have been successfully organizing and

campaigning to increase housing rights and prevent civil and human rights violations by the police as a consequence of the LAPD's over-saturation in the community under the Safer Cities Initiative. Specifically, Mr. Richardson is known as a leader in this work by both face and name to other organizers, community members, and elected and appointed officials. Because of his leadership and notoriety, criminalizing Mr. Richardson is not only troubling for its impact on him and LA CAN, but for the message it sends to other existing and potential advocates for civil and human rights throughout the city of Los Angeles, with its apparent intent to quell future protest.

The arrest of peaceful demonstrators, such as Mr. Richardson, is a violation of core constitutional rights. The right to dissent, for activists and citizens to protest government practices, is a right our nation's founders recognized as one of the most fundamental and necessary liberties for a democratic society. This letter is sent to vindicate the rights of our colleagues Mr. Richardson, LA CAN, and others throughout the city to assemble and speak their mind free from the fear that they will be punished for their views. We hope this letter will help convince you and other representatives of the city of Los Angeles to stop violating people's rights as a matter of policy and stop using taxpayers' money to wage unconstitutional and unjust political attacks against members of the grassroots community.

Sincerely,

American Civil Liberties Union – Southern California

Center for Constitutional Rights

International Alliance of Inhabitants

National Economic and Social Rights Initiative

National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty

USA-Canada Alliance of Inhabitants

U.S. Human Rights Network

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