



Miranda Massie, Maureen Johnson, Caroline Wong, and Shanta Driver at the April 10th Tribunal

Fighting Back against Racism and Sexism at UM

by the
Fightback Coalition

On April 10th, over 70 people attended a tribunal on racism and sexism at the University of Michigan. Organizers cited a consistent pattern of the UM administration in ignoring, belittling, or covering up reports of racist and sexist attacks. Several courageous volunteers stepped forward to describe their harsh personal experiences of racism and sexism at UM. Then the group, as an activist community, devised and voted on concrete steps to take against the attacks.

Some Testimonies at the Tribunal

Maureen Johnson, a black former student of the UM Music School, spoke on her pending lawsuit against the UM administration, and against former UM orchestra conductor Pierre Calabria, on four counts of sexual harassment and racist mistreatment.

Erika Dowdell, a black student, BAMN member, Michigan Student Assembly Representative and VP candidate in the recent MSA elections, described racist and hostile messages she received on her dry-erase board, and the defacement of her election poster by a racist student in the Mosher-Jordan (MOJO) dorm.

Other students shared information about the sexist harassment of Fletcher Hall female residents by Department of Public Safety student employee and Resident Advisor (RA), Jerard Covington.

Still other experiences of students at UM included:

- Regular experiences of “drive by” racist slurs.
- Racist treatment of black students by faculty and administration of the School of Education.
- Racist and sexist mistreatment of a black female student by emergency room staff at UM Hospital.
- Sexual harassment of women on the job at Markley Underground.

Students and community members offered examples of similar treatment outside UM’s campus. One student described her experience of molestation as a child, the sexual harassment of her sister, and the rape of their friend, all by a dentist who has been associated with the UM Dental School and is still practicing in Saline, Michigan.

Some Results of the Tribunal

Five resolutions were adopted: one defending affirmative action, one on the problems of sexual harassment and assault by male athletes, one to unite the struggles against racism and sexism, and two on specific cases. Participants, motivated and empowered to act on the resolutions, have already achieved important results, including:

Backing off of racist students in MOJO

Erika Dowdell distributed an open letter to every resident of MOJO dorm, making clear her continued determination to fight racism and to be a campus political leader. It was co-signed by several RAs, staff, and the director of the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program. The students who treated her in a hostile manner, and the student she suspected of defacing her flyer, no longer look her in the eye, and have not bothered her since.

Removal of sexist RA from Fletcher Hall

Tribunal organizers circulated a petition in Fletcher Hall, and at April’s “Take Back the Night” march, demanding RA Jerard Covington’s removal from DPS and any other job where he has power over women. After students circulated the petition, and after an article on the Tribunal appeared in the Michigan Daily, a Housing administrator met with eight Fletcher Hall women residents. When pressed, based on the women’s testimonies, the administrator characterized Jerard’s behavior as sexual harassment, as creating a hostile environment, and as borderline stalking. Four days later Jerard’s contract was terminated. This campaign succeeded through collective action and perseverance of the women involved, including their exposure of the administration’s cover-up and refusal to act on the women’s grievances over the past year.

Fightback’s Perspective

Our starting point is that if we fight back and build a new mass social movement we can win justice—both in individual cases and in changing the overall conditions that exist on campus.

The fight against racism and the fight against sexism have always been inextricably linked. The Civil Rights Movement that won affirmative action also gave rise to the Women’s Movement. The struggle for black equality created the social context for women to fight within, and provided the training ground that built women as political leaders. The movement to defend affirmative action on this campus has created the conditions that make it possible for a combined fight against racism and sexism to take place. Affirmative action has dramatically improved women’s lives, and has diminished sexist treatment of all kinds in society: the attack on affirmative action threatens the rights of all women.

Fightback is:

- Undergraduate Women’s Studies Association (UWSA)
- Quiet Women End Reform (QWER)
- Coalition to Defend Affirmative Action By Any Means Necessary (BAMN)
- MSA Peace and Justice Commission

For information, to report incidents or to set up a meeting in your dorm, reach the campaign organizers at fightback@umich.edu

or call (734) 615-2669.



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