U.S. Department of Justice

Office of Legislative Affairs

Office of the Assistant Attorney General

Washington, D.C. 20530

July 13, 2009

The Honorable Lamar S. Smith
Ranking Member
Committee on the Judiciary
United States House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Congressman Smith:

This responds to your letter, dated June 8, 2009, concerning *United States v. New Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, Civ. No. 09-0065 SD (E.D. Pa.)*, a case filed to enforce Section 11(b) of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, 42 U.S.C. § 1973i(b).

This case was filed on January 9, 2009. The United States obtained an injunction against a defendant who held a nightstick in front of a polling place in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The injunction is tailored appropriately to the scope of the violation and the requirements of the First Amendment, and the Department will fully enforce the terms of the injunction.

The Department voluntarily dismissed the Section 11(b) claims against three other defendants named in the complaint because the facts and the law did not support pursuing those claims against them. That decision was made after a careful and thorough review of the matter by the Acting Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights, a career employee with nearly 30 years experience in the Department, including nearly 15 years as the career Deputy Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights.

Although, as you note, these defendants failed to respond to the complaint, that does not mean the Department "had effectively won the case" against them. The Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit "does not favor entry of defaults or default judgments." *United States* v. *$55,518.05 In U.S. Currency*, 728 F.2d 192, 194 (3d Cir. 1984). Rather, it is its "preference that cases be disposed of on the merits whenever practicable." *Hritz* v. *Woma Corp.,* 732 F.2d 1178, 1181 (3d Cir. 1984); *see also Hill* v. *Williamsport Police Dept.*, 69 Fed. Appx. 49, 51 n.3 (3d Cir. 2003) (factors to consider in granting a default judgment include "whether material issues of fact

or issues of substantial public importance are at issue"). Accordingly, an entry of a default judgment in the district court is not automatic. Moreover, even if a court were to grant a default judgment on liability, the court still would need to assess the propriety of any requested injunction. *Broadcast Music, Inc.* v. *Sprint Mount Area Bavarian Resort, Ltd.*, 555 F. Supp. 2d 537, 543 (E.D. Pa. 2008) (granting injunctive relief following entry of default judgment only after considering propriety of remedy sought); *cf. Shields* v. *Zuccarini*, 254 F.3d 476, 482 (3d Cir. 2001) (identifying factors a court must consider before granting permanent injunctive relief).

Section 11(b) prohibits intimidation, threats or coercion of "any person for voting or attempting to vote, or ... for urging or aiding any person to vote or attempt to vote." The United States is authorized to enforce Section 11(b) through civil litigation and to obtain declaratory and injunctive relief. For a variety of reasons, including the limited remedies available under Section 11(b), the Department has filed only three cases under this provision in the three decades for which we have reliable records on the subject. Indeed, in the 44 years since Congress passed the Voting Rights Act, fewer than 10 reported cases have ever been brought by any party prior to the case in question.

In *U.S. v. New Black Panther Party for Self-Defense,* the district court found that the United States had alleged that Minister King Samir Shabazz "stood in front of the polling location at 1221 Fairmont Street in Philadelphia, wearing a military-style uniform, wielding a nightstick, and making intimidating statements and gestures to various individuals, all in violation of 42 U.S.C. § 1973i(b)," Order, dated May 18, 2009, at 1, and entered judgment "in favor of the United States of America and against Minister King Samir Shabazz, enjoining Minister King Samir Shabazz from displaying a weapon within 100 feet of any open polling location on any election day in the City of Philadelphia, or from otherwise violating 42 U.S.C. § 1973i(b)." Judgment, dated May 18, 2009. We believe this injunction is tailored appropriately to the scope of the violation and the requirements of the First Amendment. We intend to enforce fully the terms of this injunction. Section 11(b) does not authorize other kinds of relief, such as monetary damages or civil penalties.

The United States had, prior to these rulings, voluntarily dismissed claims against the three other defendants named in the complaint: The New Black Panther Party for Self-Defense ("the Party"), Malik Zulu Shabazz and Jerry Jackson. The Department considered not only the allegations in the complaint, but also the evidence that had been amassed by the Department to support those allegations.

The complaint alleges that the Party "made statements and posted notice that over 300 members of the New Black Panther Party for Self-Defense would be deployed at polling locations during voting on November 4, 2008, throughout the United States." Complaint, para.

12. Notably, the complaint does not allege that those statements or the notice called for any Party member to display weapons at polling locations or do anything that would violate Section 11(b). Nor is there any allegation in the complaint that Malik Zulu Shabazz made any such statement in advance of the election.

The complaint does allege that the Party and Malik Zulu Shabazz "managed" and "directed" "the behavior, actions and statements of Defendants Samir Shabazz and [Jerry] Jackson at [the Philadelphia polling place], alleged in this Complaint." Complaint, para. 12. The Department considered the evidence developed to support this allegation and concluded that the factual contentions in the complaint did not have sufficient evidentiary support.

The complaint also alleges that the Party and Malik Zulu Shabazz "endorsed" the alleged activities at the Philadelphia polling place after the election. Even assuming that a post-event "endorsement" is sufficient to impose Section 11(b) liability, the Department found the evidence on this allegation to be equivocal. The Party posted statements on its web site specifically disavowing the Philadelphia polling place activities and suspending the Party's Philadelphia chapter because of these activities.

With regard to the alleged activities at the Philadelphia polling place, the Department concluded that the allegations in the complaint regarding Samir Shabazz, the person holding the nightstick, were sufficient to state a claim under Section 11(b) and that the evidence developed supported those allegations. As noted above, we therefore sought and obtained a judgment against this defendant and appropriately tailored injunctive relief.

The Department decided not to proceed with its claims against Jerry Jackson, who was a resident of the apartment building where the polling place was located and was certified by city officials as a poll watcher. The local police officers who were called to the polling place ordered Samir Shabazz to leave the polling place, but allowed Jackson to remain. Considering the contemporaneous response of the local police officers to Jackson's activities, as well as the evidence developed to support the allegations against Jackson, the Department concluded that the factual contentions in the complaint did not have sufficient evidentiary support.

You have requested "all non-privileged documents relating to the Division's dismissal of the suit" and we have determined that the only such documents are the notice of dismissal and the court's Order, both of which are enclosed. You also have requested that the appropriate Department employees brief your staff, and we have already contacted your office to arrange a briefing.

We can assure you that the Department is committed to comprehensive and vigorous enforcement of both the civil and criminal provisions of federal law that prohibit voter

intimidation. We continue to work with voters, communities, and local law enforcement to ensure that every American can vote free from intimidation, coercion, or threats.

We hope this information is helpful. Please do not hesitate to contact this office if we may be of assistance with this or any other matter.

Sincerely,

Ronald Weich
Assistant Attorney General

Enclosures

cc: The Honorable John Conyers
Chairman
Committee on the Judiciary

The Honorable Jerrold Nadler
Chairman
Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights and Civil Liberties

The Honorable F. James Sensenbrenner, Jr.
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights and Civil Liberties