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TWO JOURNALISTS FACE CHARGES BY TRUMP ADMIN FOR ANTI-ICE PROTEST COVERAGE

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A person with their hands behind their back being escorted by ICE officers. Recently, there have been many protests against ICE and their actions. PHOTO COURTESY OF WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Two independent journalists were released from federal custody on Friday after being arrested by the Trump administration for covering an anti-ICE protest at a church in Minnesota on Jan. 18, according to NPR.

Don Lemon, a former CNN anchor, and local news reporter Georgia Fort were two of the nine defendants listed in a 14-page indictment filed in the District Court of Minnesota. The arrests came after a federal appeals court turned down a request from the Justice Department to force a judge to issue arrest warrants for more defendants in the indictment, according to The New York Times.

The indictment relies on Lemon's livestream of events to construct a timeline for the protest and uses the livestream to argue that he was complicit with the protestor's actions. An example of this is on page 10 when it describes Lemon's observations of church attendants crying, but the indictment doesn't mention the journalists participating in chants besides asking the pastor questions.

The complaint followed a protest that activists organized to disrupt Cities Church in Saint Paul, Minn., after one of the pastors, David Easterwood, was listed as a U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) official in a lawsuit challenging the federal agency's recent conduct.

Easterwood was listed as an ICE Field Office Director for St. Paul in a 72-page case arguing that ICE's Operation Metro Surge is "violently stopping and arresting countless Minnesotans based on nothing more than their race and perceived ethnicity irrespective of their citizenship or immigration status."

Administrative officials did not confirm or deny Easterwood's role with ICE, but the indictment clarifies that the pastor facing backlash was an ICE official.

Tricia McLaughlin, assistant secretary of public affairs at the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), said in a statement to Newsweek that DHS "will never confirm or deny attempts to dox our law enforcement officers. Doxing our officers puts their lives and their families in serious danger."

The beginning of the protest is described on page eight of the indictment, where it says that defendant Nekima Valdez Levy-Armstrong interrupted the service when a pastor began his sermon. The indictment puts quotes around Armstrong's first declarations about Cities Church harboring a "Director of ICE."

The indictment confirms Easterwood's role in ICE on page nine when describing how one of the defendants, Jamael Lydell Lundy, was protesting.

"LUNDY personally participated in the disruptive takeover operation with other defendants by…participating loudly in some of the chants (e.g. one saying that the targeted ICE agent must be 'Out! Out!'), and punching his fist in the air," the indictment said.

The charge filed against all nine defendants was for "Conspiracy Against Right of Religious Freedom at Place of Worship." Guilty verdicts can result in a fine or a maximum of 10 years in prison, with more years if someone died because of the violation, according to the statute.

"If two or more persons conspire to injure, oppress, threaten, or intimidate any person in any State…in the free exercise or enjoyment of any right or privilege secured to him by the Constitution or laws of the United States," the statute says.

The conspiracy against rights statute was drafted in accordance with the Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances (FACE) Act of 1994. The law shielded abortion and women's health clinics from disruptive blockades after the Supreme Court ruled against a classification of women-seeking abortions that would protect them from protests, according to The New York Times.

A provision was also included in the law to extend protections beyond women's health clinics and towards religious places of worship by prohibiting the use of threat of force and physical obstruction across both categories, according to the FACE act.

Lemon's first court appearance is scheduled for a Minneapolis federal court on Feb. 9, with his lawyer telling The New York Times that he vows to fight the charges and continue reporting independently.

Georgia Fort has also said on CNN that she will continue reporting after her arrest and said that her case presents a chilling message to the media industry, according to NPR.



Don Lemon, a former CNN anchor and independent journalist. Lemon was one of two independent journalists arrested by the Trump administration on Jan. 18 for covering an anti-ICE protest in Minnesota. PHOTO COURTESY OF WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

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