

February 16, 2023

Seattle City Council

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Dear Seattle City Council Members

My name is Dr. Cornel West and I am the [Dietrich Bonhoeffer Chair at Union Theological Seminary](#). I teach on the works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, as well as courses in Philosophy of Religion, African American Critical Thought, and a wide range of subjects — including but by no means limited to, the classics, philosophy, politics, cultural theory, literature, and music. I was also the former Professor of the Practice of Public Philosophy at Harvard University and Professor Emeritus at Princeton University. Cornel West graduated Magna Cum Laude from Harvard in three years and obtained his M.A. and Ph.D. in Philosophy at Princeton. Over the course of my career I have written 20 books and edited 13. I am best known for my work Race Matters and Democracy Matters, and for my memoir, Brother West: Living and Loving Out Loud. My most recent book, Black Prophetic Fire, offers an unflinching look at nineteenth and twentieth-century African American leaders and their visionary legacies.

**I am writing to the council with unapologetic support for the historic ordinance proposed by Councilmember Kshama Sawant to ban caste-based discrimination in Seattle city.** I stand in full solidarity with our Dalit brothers and sisters who are struggling under the most trying of circumstances to fight for their civil rights with this legislation.

I taught one of the first classes on Dr. Ambedkar at Harvard and have mentored many Dalit Scholars in time at Harvard and Union Theological including Joshua Samuel, Thenmozhi Soundararajan, and Suraj Yengde. [I also was present for the 2018 launch of Equality Lab's Caste in the United States survey](#) and stood by my Dalit sisters Thenmozhi and Dr. Maari Zwick Maitreyi who produced that survey under duress from bigoted forces. I know that my liberation is connected to my Dalit Kin and there should be no question in the council's mind that **caste is an urgent issue in Seattle and in the U.S. and should be addressed immediately.**

I ask you to not be swayed by those who use disinformation, bigotry, and innuendo to dismiss the hard and good work of Dalit Civil rights organizations. These tactics of obfuscation are well known to those of us in the Black struggle. For every step forward we take for civil rights is often met with hostility by

those who are held hostage to the evil of bigotry. Even now black scholars are being banned in 2023 by those who would hide from the sin of racism and slavery.

Discrimination is evil be it racial or caste. And it is not complex in how you address this issue. You must act with your full legal authority to ban and ensure that Seattle is safe for all. To not do so is to fail your duty as council leaders and to fail your moral call to action. There is a history of how American institutions have failed black people in ensuring our rights to be free from violence and discrimination over and over again. And we have had to use every tool we have from our culture, strategic litigation, and our movements to force governments to do the right thing. **Learn the lesson from our shameful history of anti-blackness in the U.S. and do not repeat the failures of the past with my caste-oppressed kin.**

I urge you my brothers and sisters on Seattle City Council, **hold the right course here and stand with justice and vote yes on the caste ordinance.** History will judge you on the choice you made to uphold civil rights or to postpone the path to freedom. I pray you will choose wisely.

In struggle,

Dr. Cornel West