

SCLC Presses Forward with Class-Action Suit Against Wright-Patterson AFB

By Teri Miller Barker

“The problem at Wright Patterson Air Force Base is not a Dayton problem. It’s not a Xenia problem. It’s not a Fairborn problem. It is a United States problem,” said Rev. Jerome McCorry, Vice President of the Dayton Chapter of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, in his opening dialogue in a meeting at his office.

On Wednesday, October 19, 2005, nearly 50 past and present Wright-Patt Air Force Base and National Air Force Museum civilian employees convened in the office of the Dayton Chapter of the SCLC. According to a current employee, that’s only about half of all the people who have come forward with racial discrimination complaints. The purpose of the meeting was to determine the next step that should be taken to settle the racial issues at Wright-Patt. In a unanimous vote, those in attendance decided to move forward with a class-action lawsuit, that many say, at this point is unavoidable.

In response to comments that Wright-Patt Installation Commander, Col. Andrew K. Weaver made claiming that they have not heard from Rev. McCorry since August, McCorry counters, “We have spoken. We have had a number of phone conversations. We have not had another face to face meeting, and that’s because, in respect to Colonel Weaver, I understand that he inherited a problem and he, personally, is not going to be able to fix what is broken at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base.”

McCorry further explains, “I’m not the one they really should be concerned about talking to, they need to talk to the folk who are out there every day. They have people who work there every day who are alleging discrimination and the problem is the leadership is not talking to its own people.” In his continued statement, McCorry remarked, “There’s no confidence or faith in the E.E.O. system. It has failed these people. The unions have clearly failed them. So I think that Colonel Weaver and his staff, instead of concentrating on me, need to concentrate on persons bringing the complaints down here.”

This past August, Margaret DeBow, a former Wright-Patt employee who filed her discrimination complaint through the Dayton chapter of the SCLC, won a six-figure settlement from the government. In the settling of that case, McCorry said that Colonel Weaver made the statement that it was an isolated incident. “When you have this many people coming forward, you have an awful lot of isolation at the Wright-Patterson Air Force Base,” stated McCorry. “And that’s a concern because what that says to me is that you’re in denial.”

Kimberly Roe, a Wright-Patt employee since 1983, filed a racial discrimination lawsuit in 1999. Her case is currently in Federal District Court and scheduled for trial October 31, 2005. According to Roe, she was blatantly passed over for a promotion that her counterparts at other bases received shortly after they all completed computer training to learn the database they'd be maintaining. For three years, Roe had maintained the database manually, and had received superior evaluations and monetary awards for her job performances. When she found out that she was deliberately overlooked for the upgrade, and that her supervisor was lying and conspiring with co-workers to obstruct her promotion from GS5 to GS7, she decided to fight back. Roe was the first Wright-Patt employee to contact the SCLC regarding racial discrimination on the base. After investigating the documentation she presented to support her claims, she was invited to attend the national convention in 2003, where a resolution was passed to support her case nationally. She tried to encourage other employees to share their experiences with discrimination, but had a difficult time because they hadn't gotten results with their complaints to other organizations. Roe stated, "No one had ever come forth and supported us the way the SCLC did."

Most of the employees who allege discrimination have anywhere from 15 to 35 years of service with Wright-Patt. So far, the SCLC has received 91 complaints about discrimination at the Base and at the National Air Force Museum. Wright-Patterson Air Force Base officials were not present at the meeting because it was a closed-door session.