

NEW JERSEY

Anti-Semitism charges engulfing national Women's March sow divisions in New Jersey

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The first Women's March on New Jersey began with an email.

In November 2016, a few weeks after the election of President Donald Trump, Elizabeth Meyer reached out to the organizers of the Women's March in Washington, D.C., with a request: could she organize a similar march in Trenton?

She was given approval several days later.

From then on, the relationship between the national march and the New Jersey march was nonexistent, Meyer said. The national group did not provide any financial or organizational assistance the first year of the march in 2017, or the next year, or this year.

Since its inception, the Women's March on New Jersey has operated as an independent coalition of local activists and organizations, Meyer said.

It was a distinction that was never articulated to the march's supporters until late last year, when accusations of anti-Semitism within the national Women's March prompted Meyer and her co-organizers to assert the New Jersey march's independence.

"The coalition does not receive any financial or organizational assistance from, nor is not affiliated with, the national Women's March, Inc.," the lead organizers wrote at the bottom of a Dec. 3 press release.

The statement followed months of public backlash against several leaders of the national group for associating with Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan, who is widely known for his anti-Semitic and homophobic rhetoric.

Tamika Mallory, co-president of the national Women's March group, attended an event hosted by Farrakhan last year and called him "the GOAT" or "greatest of all time," on social media. Accusations of anti-Semitism have also been leveled against leaders Carmen Perez and Linda Sarsour for failing to condemn Farrakhan and allegedly espousing anti-Jewish views within the group.

The controversy spurred an exodus of sponsors and sister marches in recent weeks, with cancellations of marches in New Orleans and Tacoma, Washington, and the loss of sponsors such as the NAACP and the Democratic National Committee.

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New York City will hold dueling marches on Saturday. One is affiliated with the national group and another is being led by March On, a group headed by a Jewish co-founder of the national Women's March who accused national organizers of making anti-Semitic remarks during the planning stages of the first march in 2016.

The national Women's March website lists three affiliated marches in New Jersey on Saturday: a "March of Purpose" in Newark, a high school march in Franklin and a rally in Asbury Park. Other marches are planned in Leonia and Atlantic City.

The Women's March on New Jersey is the state's flagship march, drawing 7,500 women and allies to Trenton in 2017 and 15,000 supporters to Morristown last year, where first lady Tammy Murphy shared her #MeToo story.

The decision to distance Saturday's march in Trenton from the national organization was unanimous, said Maria Santiago-Valentin, a co-lead organizer.

"We want to embrace everybody," she said. "We thought it was critical to make that point evident, that we are not supporting the statements of that man. We wanted people to feel that it didn't matter what walk of life they were coming from, that they were welcome."

But for some former New Jersey march participants, the distancing has had an opposite effect.

In a Dec. 20 letter sent to Women's March on New Jersey organizers and sponsors, 15 local activists from immigrant, Muslim, Palestinian, Democratic and women's organizations argued that disassociating from the Women's March will damage and weaken the national movement.

Two sponsors of the New Jersey march, the New Jersey chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations and the immigrant rights organization Make the Road New Jersey, also pulled their support.

Essma Bengabsia, a Muslim activist who spoke at the Women's March on New Jersey last year, led the effort to write the letter and accused Meyer, a white woman, of spearheading a breakaway that made women of color feel excluded.

"I think it's important to recognize white privilege and the spaces of white privilege when they come about because she, by pulling away from the national movement, is rejecting the leadership of a number of minority women and women of color and saying, 'We refuse to recognize those figures as my leaders and we think that we can do this movement better,'" Bengabsia said.

The letter describes the controversy surrounding the national march as attacks orchestrated by systems of white supremacy that do not want to see women of color leading a large social justice movement. Mallory is a black gun control activist, Perez is a Latina criminal justice reform activist and Sarsour is a Palestinian-American activist.

"White supremacists will deploy every tool they can to discredit and marginalize these women, and to strip them of their power entirely," the letter states. "When women of color are under attack, we should not isolate them. Rather, we should step in to protect and empower them."

In an emailed response, the leadership team for the Women's March on New Jersey wrote that it would take the group's concerns into consideration after Saturday's march.

Meyer declined to comment on the letter this week but said that more than 75 percent of her 13-member core leadership team is black and brown women.

"We have incorporated as many diverse voices in the planning process as possible," Meyer said.

Santiago-Valentin, an Afro-Latina woman who is among those voices, defended Meyer's leadership and said she was hurt by accusations from critics that she and other women of

color organizers were being used as tokens.

“The event was created by us,” Santiago-Valentin said. “Elizabeth was the person who kept us together, helped us find the funding, the logistics, the sponsors. What’s wrong with someone of privilege advocating for people of color? What’s wrong with that?”

Bengabsia and her fellow letter signees have also criticized how the Women’s March on New Jersey handled the rift with the national movement, arguing that it always presented itself as the de facto state branch of the national march and was not transparent in communicating that it was not.

Meyer said the New Jersey march never felt the need to clarify that it was independent until friends and followers on social media began asking last year about its affiliation. Organizers have made comments on Facebook and revised the march’s mission statement to strongly reflect inclusiveness but decided against issuing a public statement in order to stay above the controversy engulfing the national movement, Meyer said.

“We’re choosing to keep the focus of our march positive,” Meyer said. “We have a lot of work that we need to concentrate on here and honestly don’t have the time or energy to look outward.”

Bengabsia said she will be attending the march in Atlantic City, a sister march of the national organization, as a result of the Women’s March on New Jersey’s actions. She urged others to do the same.

Organizers of the Atlantic City march, which is being led by black women and will honor civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer, said the march is not intended to be a rival to the Trenton march.

“There is no competition, there are about five different marches going on in the state of New Jersey and anything that uplifts women, we are all for,” said Estina Baker, senior adviser to the march.

Ashley Bennett, an Atlantic County freeholder who conceived the idea for the march, said she chose to remain affiliated with the national Women’s March because of the inspiration it gave her to run for office and the activism and solidarity it fostered among women.

“We respect the history of that first march and what it did for people and we honor that legacy, but we do know that people are imperfect and that the Women’s March is more than just the organizers,” Bennett said.

Santiago-Valentin said she wanted to see new leaders take the helm of the national movement on a rotating basis to represent the community rather than the individual.

“The march is a grassroots movement and the movement is no one face,” Santiago-Valentin said. “It’s the face of an old lady, it’s the face of a disabled lady, it’s the face of an incarcerated lady, it’s the face of a transgender woman. It can’t be the same one.”

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