

Alabama Legislature honors Birmingham native: Bentley refuses to sign resolution commending former Communist activist Angela Davis

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The Alabama Legislature may be controlled by free enterprise-loving conservative Republicans, but it found time last month to pass a resolution honoring one of the Communist Party's previous vice-presidential nominees.

The House approved a joint resolution Feb. 14 honoring professor and activist Angela Davis; the Senate concurred with the resolution five days later. The resolution was forwarded to Gov. Robert Bentley, who declined to sign the document.

Jennifer Ardis, a spokeswoman for Bentley, said Thursday the governor withheld his signature "because he had reservations about commending someone who had leadership ties to the Communist Party."

Davis, a Birmingham native and civil rights activist, is a former member of the Communist Party of the United States of America. The party nominated her for vice president in 1980 and 1984. Davis left the Communist Party over 20 years ago, and later helped found the Committees of Correspondence, a democratic socialist group.

Weapons owned by Davis were used in a shoot-out in a California courthouse in 1970 that left a judge and five other people dead. Davis was arrested but later found not guilty of kidnapping and murder charges in connection with the incident.

She has worked on efforts to abolish the U.S. prison system, citing her own experiences in custody. The resolution stresses Davis' efforts on the issue, along with her work in "building communities of struggle for economic, racial and gender justice."

Rep. Oliver Robinson, D-Birmingham, the sponsor of the resolution, said it was introduced in conjunction with a scheduled appearance by Davis in Birmingham on March 30.

"She was a part of our history when I was growing up," said Robinson. "She was very important in the movement to self-belief and independence. I think it's a wonderful idea at this time to honor her and bring her back as much as possible."

There were differing opinions Thursday as to the effect of Bentley's actions.

The Governor's Office said the resolution was returned to the Legislature on Feb. 26, and would go into effect without the governor's signature.

Pat Harris, the secretary of the Senate, said a joint resolution needed the signature of the governor in order to take effect. Jeff Woodard, the clerk of the House of Representatives, said they had not seen that the resolution had been returned, but believed it was law.

ALISON, the legislative information system, lists the resolution as "enacted." The Secretary of State's office lists the resolution as Act 2013-26.

Like most resolutions of commendation and congratulation, the resolution passed both chambers on a voice vote. Commendation resolutions are generally passed en masse, as a courtesy to their sponsors.

Attempts to reach Davis through the University of California Santa Cruz, where she serves as a distinguished professor emerita, were unsuccessful last week.

Rep. Mac McCutcheon, R-Huntsville, the chairman of the Rules Committee, said he did not immediately affiliate the Angela Davis in the resolution with the activist Angela Davis.

“Later on, some history came out,” he said.

McCutcheon noted that resolutions generally are voted on in a block, and that members of both party caucuses probably did not read it before voting. Had he known, McCutcheon said he might have spoken to Robinson about the reasoning behind the resolution.

“I try to respect their decision,” he said. “Then again, if there’s an issue, I want to make sure I’m protective of the body.”

Davis is scheduled to speak at the 16th Street Baptist Church at an event sponsored by the Metro Birmingham branch of the NAACP. The church was bombed in 1963, killing four girls.

Hezekiah Jackson, president of the Birmingham branch, said Davis was invited in conjunction with 50th anniversary commemorations of that event and other civil rights milestones that took place in Birmingham that year.

“She’s a Birmingham native, and a well-documented civil and human rights activist, and that’s what the 50th anniversary is all about,” he said.