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By RHONDA CROWDER
Staff Reporter

While the nation awaits the forthcoming release of the official numbers on poverty from the U.S. Census Bureau, set to be released after the party conventions, broadcaster Tavis Smiley and Princeton University Professor Emeritus Cornel West – hosts of the nationally syndicated public radio program “Smiley & West” from Public Radio International (PRI) – are once again bringing attention to economic injustice by announcing “The Poverty Tour 2.0.”

“The Poverty Tour 2.0” will be on the road Sept. 2-15, 2012, visiting four battleground states: Ohio, Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Florida, continuing the moral crusade to make the eradication of poverty a top priority in America – a clarion call to President Obama and Governor Romney as the race for the White House heats up.

Suspecting that both candidates have taken up residency in Ohio, the tour will stop in Cleveland first on September 12 from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. at Westfield Insurance Studio Theatre, Idea Center at Playhouse Square, 1375 Euclid Avenue.

During a one-on-one phone interview with Smiley, he asserted that poverty is an issue he’s chosen to take up because anybody and everybody are affected by poverty. It’s not a Black problem or a White problem. It’s an American problem.

According to Smiley, nearly 150 million, 1 and 2, half of Americans are living in poverty.

“Poverty has become the new American norm,” said Smiley, who along with West is on a mission to underscore the problem. “We’re trying to beat this drum.”

When asked why neither politician is talking about helping the poor, Smiley said, “They are rendered invisible...”

Smiley went on to spell out what needs to be done between today and Election Day on the issue of poverty. One, he said, we have to make noise, beat the drum.

“Poverty is affecting our democracy,” he said, then explained that the top 400 richest individuals in American own and control more wealth than the bottom 150 million. “You can’t sustain a democracy when half the people are in poverty.”

Second, we have to push and demand that the two presidential candidates address this issue during the upcoming debates, as opposed to ignoring it like in the last presidential election cycle. “We want to know where they stand,” said Smiley.

And, third, we need a candidate to make a promise that, once in office, they’ll bring the experts together to call upon a White House conference on the eradication of poverty.

“It’s not a matter of skill, it’s a matter of will,” Smiley proclaimed.

He said the eradication of poverty in America can end with the president.

“It’s nothing like having the president call a state of emergency. They call a state of emergency on natural disasters. They can call one on poverty. It’s an unnatural disaster.” He also explained that a state of emergency will demand extra resources and energy be allocated to solving this problem.

Basically, all West and Smiley want is the creation of a national bi-partisan plan to address poverty. Smiley insists that ignoring the issue is a matter of national security. “The Occupy Movement was a wake up call,” he said.

The goal of the Poverty Tour is to get the conversation about poverty going.

“We have to get the buzz going about poverty the same way we did about Obama four years ago. We have to get just as excited around an issue, as we do about a person, and demand a solution.”

Understanding the criticism he's received from within the Black community in light of his criticism of Obama, he said, God has blessed him to have access, being a broadcaster, and he will continue to tell the truth. And the truth is more than many of us are one paycheck away from living in poverty.

Smiley also said we should never surrender our agencies to being outraged, to being angry. And, right now, nobody thinks we can say something for fear of hurting Obama. "I haven't done anything with President Obama that I have not done with any other president," he said.

To put it plan and simple, we have been too quiet during this presidential term.

"Black people have surrendered the ability to be outraged. We have become silent. The Black prophetic tradition of speaking truth to power is nonexistent. In silence, we are killing ourselves."

Smiley concluded by saying we can love, pray for, support, and campaign for President Obama yet still make demands. And, for real, if we are doing that, we should be shouting our demands the loudest.

At the same time, when it comes to casting our vote, he said, "If the choice is Obama or Romney, we say, hands down, Obama is the better choice. But, he still needs to be pushed. He still needs to be held accountable and we can do it in loving, respectable, and civil