On Sept 18th, Dr. Erik McDuffie and other faculty in the Department of African American Studies organized the latest Freedom Forum to discuss strategies for Black liberation both on campus and globally. Below is BUF’s response.

Black United Front UIUC would like to point out the contradictions embedded within tonight’s Freedom Forum.

In April Dr. Erik McDuffie, along with Dr. Faye Harrison, Dr. Merle Bowen and Dr. Candice Jenkins*, penned an open letter that undermined the actions of Black students organizing for change on this campus. In that letter these professors claimed Black students were being manipulated by two other faculty members they have personal and political differences with. This false accusation stripped agency from the independent actions of Black student activists and hurt the professional credibility of the accused faculty members.

That open letter was written in response to the Black United Front’s efforts to save the academic advisor position within the department of African American Studies and stop the termination it’s long-term academic adviser - a local scholar-activist named Lou Turner. The open letter portrayed Black student activists as puppets - weakening the legitimacy of our demands and on-campus work. The letter also urged that students be given no say in how the department department is managed, and condemned students’ and staffs’ valid critiques of it’s current head.

Thus we find it ironic that Dr. McDuffie would organize a forum with the purpose of exploring paths toward Black liberation on campus. The #TurnUp4Turner protests were a path towards Black liberation on campus - yet Dr. McDuffie vocally and publicly questioned that protest’s validity. How can this Freedom Forum honestly address “campus organizing towards liberation”, when it’s lead organizer undermined one such effort?

Throughout tonight’s Freedom Forum, overt acts of White Supremacy will be vocally and repeatedly condemned. This is good, but it is also easy. It is much more difficult to work towards Black liberation when the issues become “too close for comfort”. Case in point: the four professors who wrote that letter are Black intellectuals who are very comfortable with theoretical discussions of Black liberation. These same professors were “deeply troubled” when confronted with the reality of Black campus liberation this spring. Like us, they have no qualms condemning Charlottesville and Donald Trump. However, they refused to support Black students as we condemned Dr. Bailey’s decision to deny Afro majors and minors access to a professional in-unit academic advisor.

We will not allow ourselves to be satisfied with easy conversations or be content when our professors’ support for radical Black politics is merely theoretical. We will push ourselves and our community to wed theory with action. The Black United Front believes that it is only through this process of consistent internal critique that we can ever realize Black liberation on our campus.

*This letter does not aim to disparage the academic or social worth that the writers of the letter have within our community.