

New date to be set for execution of Mumia Abu-Jamal

Fred Mazelis
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A new date for the execution of former Black Panther and radio journalist Mumia Abu-Jamal is expected to be set some time in the next month. Abu-Jamal's attorney Leonard Weinglass estimates that all appeals could be exhausted by this coming May. Abu-Jamal, convicted in the shooting death of a Philadelphia policeman, has already spent more than 16 years on death row.

His case has received international attention and the support of many opposed to the death penalty, who have cited the overwhelming evidence of police abuse and judicial bias which led to Abu-Jamal's conviction and death sentence. Right-wing forces are determined to see the execution carried through, and are seeking to make a political example of Abu-Jamal.

A benefit concert for Abu-Jamal held this past week became the target of a witch-hunt by New Jersey Governor Christine Todd Whitman, other politicians, police groups and the media. The sold-out concert was held Thursday night at the Continental Airlines Arena in East Rutherford, New Jersey, attracting 16,000. Governor Whitman officially denounced the event, and urged ticketholders to seek refunds. In a thinly veiled incitement to violence against Abu-Jamal supporters, New York State Senator Serphin Maltese accused the concert audience of being "pro-cop killer." The commander of the New Jersey State Police expressed his outrage over having to provide security for the concert, and the New Jersey State Attorney General apologized for having no legal way to close down the event.

State Senate Minority Leader Richard J. Codey introduced a bill that would divert state profits from the event, estimated at \$50,000 to \$75,000, to the New Jersey 200 clubs, an organization supporting the families of police officers killed in the line of duty.

"We should send a clear message that we are more concerned for families of crime victims than for a condemned killer," said Codey.

An Atlantic County radio station, WJSE-FM in Somers Point, banned airplay for the bands who performed at the event. Station owner Al Parinello said the ban would remain in effect "maybe until the murderer is himself murdered."

The concert featured Rage Against the Machine, the Beastie Boys and Bad Religion, and was expected to raise nearly \$400,000, with a portion of the proceeds going to the defense campaign. Tom Morello, the guitarist for Rage Against the Machine, said that other groups, including the rock duo the Indigo Girls, the heavy metal group Black Sabbath, and the Latin big band Ozomatli, had also offered to play. "It's not the first time that Rage Against the Machine has opened up a can of worms by standing up for what we believed in," said Morello. "We've had the Ku Klux Klan protest our shows, but I didn't expect this from the Governor of New Jersey's office."

The latest stage in the long campaign on behalf of Abu-Jamal began immediately after the Pennsylvania Supreme Court ruled last October 29 to deny the defendant a new trial. The court sent its decision to the office of Pennsylvania Governor Thomas Ridge on November 25, and Ridge has 90 days from that date to sign a new death warrant. Should the governor fail for any reason to set a new execution date, the State Department of Corrections can carry out this function.

Abu-Jamal was well known in the Philadelphia area as a radical black nationalist, and his 1982 trial was marked by repeated and flagrant examples of prosecutorial misconduct aimed at punishing him for his political views. A witness who had been coerced later recanted her testimony, and another whom the

prosecution had refused to call came forward to tell his version, which pointed to another shooter. The medical examiner's report indicated that Mumia's gun could not have fired the bullet that killed the officer.

Despite this and other new evidence, and the obvious bias of a judge who has imposed 32 death sentences--more than any other judge in the country--and who illegally barred Abu-Jamal from the courtroom during his trial, the defendant is now left with few legal options. Under the Effective Death Penalty Act, a bipartisan measure championed and signed by Bill Clinton in 1996, the federal courts are no longer permitted to examine the evidence in a state trial.

Mumia Abu-Jamal's case has become a rallying point for the fight against capital punishment internationally. The US is virtually alone among major industrial nations in maintaining and expanding its use of the death penalty, imposed overwhelmingly against poor people and the minority black and Hispanic populations. Fueled by judicial rulings such as the Effective Death Penalty Act, the rate of state-sponsored killings has increased steadily since the US Supreme Court ruled in favor of capital punishment in 1976. As of January 22, 509 people have been put to death in the US since the reinstatement of the death penalty.

Amnesty International is among the organizations which have called for a new trial for Abu-Jamal and the European Parliament has also supported his case. Protests on behalf of Abu-Jamal have been held in Berlin, London, Oslo and other parts of the world. Abu-Jamal has also become known for his writings from prison, including his 1995 book, *Live From Death Row*.

Another attempt to counter the spreading awareness of this case was a recent segment on ABC-TV's 20/20 newsmagazine. The December 9 program was a crude attempt to minimize the support for Abu-Jamal and lend backing to the tainted 1982 verdict. Veteran ABC correspondent Sam Donaldson dispensed with any pretense of objectivity, telling the *Philadelphia Inquirer* that he was personally convinced of Abu-Jamal's guilt.

Defense attorney Weinglass said about the 20/20 program that ABC "had to trot out their number one person [Donaldson], who is almost always seen in the company of President Clinton and foreign heads of state, to do an incredible hatchet job."

Weinglass pointed out that ABC carefully omitted all the facts that pointed to frame-up, police intimidation and courtroom bias. "Did anything get on Donaldson's show that said Mumia's lawyer [at the original trial] testified that he didn't interview a single witness? Or that his investigator testified that he quit the case before the trial because there weren't enough funds? His firearms expert said he never examined any of the ballistics because there weren't enough funds? A doctor testified that Mumia needed a doctor but he couldn't be brought in because there weren't enough funds? Or that 11 qualified jurors were removed because of race, or that the prosecution wrongfully used Mumia's political history 12 years earlier when he was 16 years old?"

Letters and telegrams protesting the planned execution and demanding a new trial for Mumia Abu-Jamal should be sent to Governor Thomas Ridge, Main Capitol Building, Room 225, Harrisburg, PA 17120; US Attorney General Janet Reno, Main Justice Building, 10th and Constitution Ave., Washington DC 20052; as well as to the Philadelphia Supreme Court and US Supreme Court.

The web site address for full information on the defense campaign for Mumia Abu-Jamal is <http://www.mumia.org>



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