

The political issues in the fight to defend Mumia Abu-Jamal

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The broadest possible support must be won in the United States and internationally to oppose the execution of Mumia Abu-Jamal, demand a new trial and fight for the freedom of this political prisoner who has spent more than 16 years on death row.

The case of Abu-Jamal has become a focal point of opposition, both in America and around the world, to the barbaric practice of capital punishment. He is one among thousands sitting on death row in the US.

The assembly-line killings of prisoners, together with the repeated instances of police torture and murder--such as the shooting death of 22-year-old African immigrant Amadou Diallo in New York City--are correctly seen by people around the world as symptoms of a diseased society.

Despite overwhelming evidence of Abu-Jamal's innocence, the authorities are determined to carry out the final act in their vendetta against the former Black Panther Party member. The planned state murder of Abu-Jamal is part of a deepening assault on basic democratic rights. It would be an infamous act, the first execution of a political prisoner since the electrocution of the Rosenbergs in 1953.

The ominous implications of this case were underscored in January, when the Republican governor of New Jersey, Christine Todd Whitman, led a political witch-hunt against a benefit concert in behalf of Abu-Jamal held at the Continental Airlines Arena in East Rutherford, New Jersey. New York State Senator Serphin Maltese accused the audience of being "pro-cop killer." Statements by politicians and police officials amounted to thinly veiled incitements to violence against Abu-Jamal's supporters.

This episode revealed the essence of the persecution of Abu-Jamal--the attempt on the part of the political establishment and the media to criminalize opposition to the status quo among working people, the poor and racial

minorities. By executing the former radio journalist, they are out to set an example, to intimidate and silence opponents of the right-wing policies being carried out by both big business parties and all of the institutions of the government--Congress, the judiciary and the White House.

As far as the American authorities are concerned, high profile executions, besides demonstrating the repressive power of the state, have an additional political benefit. They are considered an effective means of brutalizing the public. A population which sees the American government put people to death on a daily basis will more easily be inured to accept the violent actions of US military forces around the world and the appalling conditions which face millions of impoverished people at home.

Already the American government drops bombs with impunity on a virtually defenseless Iraq and enforces sanctions that kill thousands of children every month, with little public protest. Within the US, homeless people are treated as criminals, so-called "illegal aliens" are deported, jailed and brutalized, welfare mothers are stripped of their benefits and forced to work for poverty wages. Those responsible for such policies seek consciously to benumb the social and moral sensibilities of the population, as they prepare to escalate their attacks on working people both at home and abroad.

It is undeniable that there is widespread support in America today for the death penalty. This is an expression of the prevailing reactionary political climate and the disorientation of broad layers of the population, who are effectively disenfranchised by a political system dominated by two big business parties. Faced with enormous social problems--declining living standards, economic insecurity, deteriorating schools--and lacking any broad-based, socially progressive alternative in the political arena, sections of the population are vulnerable to demagogues who offer simplistic solutions.

But such political confusion is not permanent. It can and must be overcome. The immense contradictions of American capitalism create powerful conditions for the development of a mass movement against the profit system. Indeed, the systematic effort of the ruling class to build up the repressive powers of the state is driven by fears of a coming social explosion.

The most important social fact of the last quarter century has been the staggering polarization of American society between a wealthy elite, which has enriched itself enormously, and the vast majority of the population, millions of whom already live in poverty, while millions more are struggling just to make ends meet. The wealthy few control the Democratic and Republican parties, the media conglomerates and every official institution of American life. The entire life of the country is organized around their needs.

Democratic forms of rule are increasingly incompatible with these vast differences in wealth and income. The deepening class antagonism between the ruling elite and the mass of working people is the driving force behind the intensification of police brutality, the buildup of the prisons, the accelerated pace of executions. The victims of the death penalty--white, black, Hispanic or immigrant--have one thing in common: almost without exception they are drawn from the poorest strata of the population.

The Democratic Party, as well as the Republican, is up to its neck in the assault on democratic rights. Clinton campaigned in 1992 as a new kind of law-and-order, right-wing Democrat. So that there would be no doubt about his support for capital punishment, he went back to Arkansas during the campaign to preside over an execution. The Effective Death Penalty Act, a reactionary bipartisan measure signed by Clinton in 1996, blocks federal courts from examining the evidence in state trials, undermining the rights of death row prisoners.

On every front--attacks on the right of habeas corpus, immigrants' rights, free speech on the Internet, increasing the scope of wiretapping--Clinton has lined up with the FBI, the police and the right wing. He is now calling for hundreds of millions of dollars to pursue the fight against "terrorism." This is part of an effort to create an atmosphere of panic in which further inroads against civil liberties can be made.

The Democratic Party has demonstrated its inability to defend democratic rights even when its own immediate interests are threatened, as in the Starr investigation and the impeachment drive against the Clinton White House.

Fully aware that the impeachment trial was the product of a right-wing political conspiracy, congressional Democrats and Clinton himself refrained from any effort to expose the neo-fascist elements, both inside and outside the Republican Party, who set these events in motion.

The defense of Mumia Abu-Jamal and other victims of state repression cannot be based on appeals to Democratic Party politicians and liberal circles within the ruling elite, or reliance on a judicial system which is a stronghold of the ultra-right. Democratic rights can be defended only through a struggle to mobilize the great social force that is being driven into battle against the profit system and its political representatives. That social force is the working class.

In order to generate a broad movement both within the United States and internationally against the state murder of Mumia Abu-Jamal, his defense must be linked to the social questions that confront the masses of working people: poverty, economic insecurity, social inequality. On the basis of such a struggle, ever broader layers of the population will come to understand that the same forces victimizing Abu-Jamal are victimizing the entire working class, and that the law-and-order witch-hunt directed against him is aimed at the rights of all working people.

Such an orientation will lay the foundations for a powerful anti-capitalist political movement. Once the working class begins to move as a class, once it begins to sense its strength and identify its independent interests, many questions will begin to be clarified, including the death penalty. Such a perspective is a certain, and, in fact, the only basis for overcoming divisions based on race, nationality and ethnicity.

History demonstrates that only the intervention of wide layers of the population acting on their own program and in their own interests can bring about a radical change in the political and social situation. This, in our view, must be the perspective guiding the defense of political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal.



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