

Framed Black Panther leader Geronimo Pratt wins appeal

Martin McLaughlin
18 February 1999

Political prisoner Elmer "Geronimo" Pratt won what appears to be a final and definitive legal decision in his 27-year battle against frame-up by the Los Angeles police and prosecutors, as a California Appeals Court panel unanimously upheld the decision of a lower court judge who ordered Pratt's release.

Orange County Superior Court Judge Everett Dickey, a conservative Republican, ruled that Pratt's 1972 conviction on murder and kidnapping charges should be overturned because of misconduct by the Los Angeles district attorney's office, which concealed from the defense and the jury that the key witness against Pratt was a paid police informant.

Los Angeles District Attorney Gil Garcetti appealed this decision, and on Tuesday the 2nd District Circuit Court of Appeal issued a 3-0 ruling upholding Judge Dickey and reaffirming his order that Pratt receive a new trial. Garcetti announced Wednesday that Los Angeles authorities were dropping all charges against Pratt, because most witnesses in the case have died and Pratt had already served 27 years in prison before his release in June 1997.

Pratt was arrested in 1970 and charged with the kidnapping and murder of Caroline Olsen, a Los Angeles teacher. Olsen and her husband Kenneth were attacked on a tennis court in Santa Monica in December 1968 by two black men. Three years later, Kenneth Olsen positively identified Geronimo Pratt as one of the assailants, from a photo given him by the LAPD. Pratt was the fourth black man whom Olsen identified under police pressure.

The frame-up was part of the war against the Black Panther Party conducted by the FBI and the LAPD. Julius Butler, the main "witness" against Pratt, had been an informer for both agencies within the Panthers, and he had been expelled from the organization by Pratt

because of his advocacy of violence. At the direction of the FBI and LAPD, Butler testified that Pratt had confessed to killing Caroline Olsen.

The FBI closed its file on Butler during the trial so that he could deny that he was an informer when asked. Afterwards he resumed informing and his file was reopened. The LAPD apparently did not even bother to carry out such a cosmetic gesture, flatly denying Butler's role as a police snitch.

Even after the revelations about the FBI's COINTELPRO program in the late 1970s confirmed that Butler had been a police spy, Los Angeles authorities continued to oppose any retrial or release of Geronimo Pratt, keeping the innocent man imprisoned for another 20 years.

The COINTELPRO operation was a systematic effort to destroy the Black Panther Party--as well as other left-wing organizations--through infiltration, frame-up and, on several occasions, outright murder. Pratt became head of the Los Angeles chapter of the Panthers after two predecessors, Alprentice Carter and John Huggins, were assassinated by George and Larry Stiner, FBI informers who worked inside the US (United Slaves) organization of Ron Karenga.

According to the memoirs of former FBI agent Wesley Swearingen, the FBI also had a wiretap of the Black Panther Party headquarters in Los Angeles during the period that Caroline Olsen was murdered. The wiretap logs, which showed that Geronimo Pratt was in the San Francisco Bay Area the day of the murder, not in Los Angeles, were destroyed.

Another FBI wiretap on the San Francisco office of the Panthers showed that Pratt was there on the day of the murder, but these records were also withheld from the defense.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact