1,700 at New York rally to defend Mumia Abu-Jamal

David Walsh
3 March 1999

Some 1,700 people filled Town Hall in midtown Manhattan last Friday night to oppose the execution of former Black Panther and MOVE supporter Mumia Abu-Jamal. Framed up because of his political convictions and activism, Abu-Jamal has been on death row in a Pennsylvania prison for more than 16 years. His motion for a new trial was rejected by the Pennsylvania Supreme Court in October. Governor Thomas Ridge is expected to set a new execution date within the next few months.

Abu-Jamal's case has become a focal point in the struggle against capital punishment and in defense of democratic rights. The former radio journalist from Philadelphia has spoken out articulately from behind bars on the inhuman treatment meted out to death row prisoners. Many of those in attendance February 26 were students and young people angered by the law-and-order hysteria of the political establishment. The meeting took place three weeks after the brutal slaying of African immigrant Amadou Diallo by New York City police, who fired 41 shots at the unarmed man.

Addressing Friday night's gathering, Abu-Jamal's attorney Leonard Weinglass outlined the present state of the legal case. Weinglass and his legal team are currently petitioning the US Supreme Court for a writ of certiorari, a legal device by which the high court may elect to review an issue. Abu-Jamal has until April 24 to file the petition. In the motion he is asking the court to review violations of his Sixth Amendment rights. Abu-Jamal was denied the right to defend himself and have the legal representative of his choosing. For most of his trial, he was barred from the court by Judge Albert Sabo.

If the Supreme Court rejects the application for a writ of certiorari, which is likely, Abu-Jamal's lawyers will proceed through the normal appeal process by seeking a writ of habeas corpus from the federal district court in Philadelphia.

At the rally Weinglass noted that key witnesses in the case had recanted previous testimony, wrung out of them by police pressure, implicating Abu-Jamal in the December 1981 shooting death of police officer Daniel Faulkner. He further explained that Abu-Jamal's original lawyer was inexperienced and has subsequently been disbarred. The court-appointed attorney called no experts to testify and, lacking the necessary funds, did not hire a pathologist to examine the evidence. This attorney has acknowledged that he did not interview any of the witnesses.

Weinglass observed that the October 1998 ruling by the Pennsylvania Supreme Court justices, all elected officials, rejecting the motion for a new trial was "a career decision." They were afraid for their jobs, he suggested.

Abu-Jamal's attorney condemned the Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996, signed into law by Bill Clinton, which severely restricts the right of federal courts to overturn decisions in state trials. Weinglass explained that before this law went into effect 38 percent of state death penalty cases had been reversed by federal judges. Without these reversals, he said, there would now be 5,000 individuals on death row in the US. The attorney saluted those in attendance, suggesting that there was increased support and interest in Abu-Jamal's case. He told the crowd that the next 12 to 18 months would be decisive.

Robert Meeropol, the younger son of executed political prisoners Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, sent a message to the February 26 rally. It read in part: "During the 1990s I have spoken frequently about my parents' case, the death penalty and my work to help the children of progressive activists who are under attack in

© World Socialist Web Site

our country. But I have been speaking about my parents' case since the 1970s. During the 1970s a radio journalist interviewed me while I was in Philadelphia. He gave me a platform to spread the word of my parents' frame-up. During that interview he asked if something like what happened to my parents could happen again in this country. And we agreed that given the courts and racism, it could. And now that interviewer, Mumia Abu-Jamal, faces execution! He is the first political prisoner in this country to face execution since my parents."

Novelist E.L. Doctorow also sent a message to the gathering, indicating his deep skepticism about the police testimony. He noted that most industrial nations "have forsworn the death penalty" and termed it "inconceivable" that Abu-Jamal should be executed.

Others who addressed the rally included Monica Moorehead of the Workers World Party, C. Clark Kissinger of Refuse & Resist!, Dennis Rivera of hospital workers' union 1199, Michael Tarif Warren, another of Abu-Jamal's attorneys, former US Attorney General Ramsey Clark, and Geronimo Ji Jaga (Pratt), the former Black Panther freed recently after 27 years in prison. Actor Ossie Davis served as one of the moderators of the rally, and singer Pete Seeger performed.

Mass demonstrations in support of Abu-Jamal are planned for April 24 in Philadelphia and San Francisco.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site