

The fight to free Mumia Abu-Jamal and the defense of democratic rights

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The defense of Mumia Abu-Jamal has become a focal point of the struggle in the United States and internationally against political repression, racism and capital punishment. The issues in his case go to the defense of democratic rights as a whole and the fight for social justice. It is critical that the campaign against the execution of this political prisoner, to secure a new trial and win his freedom, be broadened to involve ever wider layers of working people, youth and students.

Well before his 1982 frame-up, Mumia was targeted for persecution by the FBI, former mayor Frank Rizzo and the Philadelphia police department because of his outspoken opposition to police brutality and racism. Since his imprisonment Mumia has been a courageous and articulate opponent of capital punishment and the inhuman treatment of prisoners.

There should be no illusions about the intent of the authorities. They are determined to carry out the final act of their political vendetta against Mumia and to silence him once and for all. His execution would have far-ranging consequences. Such a high-profile state killing, the first execution of a political prisoner in decades, would signal an intensification of political repression and further restrictions on democratic and civil rights. The authorities aim to make an example of Mumia and create an atmosphere of intimidation and fear to curtail all forms of dissent.

The connection between the persecution of Mumia and the wider attack on democratic rights is underscored by the campaign by politicians and police officials to stop the protest movement against Mumia's execution. Last January New Jersey Governor Whitman led a witch-hunt against the benefit concert for Mumia in East Rutherford. In New York City Mayor Giuliani's police have broken up meetings called to build support for Mumia. Most recently, Philadelphia Mayor Rendell attempted to restrict the number of participants in the April 24 march to 500, and prevent supporters from publicizing the protest the night before in many downtown areas.

In taking forward the struggle to defend Mumia, it is above all necessary to grasp the connection between his case and the social and political crisis in America that underlies it. The growing assault on democratic rights is rooted in the pervasive inequality that plagues American society. The US today has the greatest disparities of wealth of any major industrial country. A small elite headed up by Wall Street speculators, bankers and corporate executives amasses ever-greater levels of private wealth, while the vast majority of working people face an ever more difficult struggle to support their families.

Over the past 20 years workers have seen their living standards stagnate or decline. It takes both spouses working, often holding down multiple jobs and working long hours of overtime, just to put food on the table and pay the rent or mortgage. In the midst of an unprecedented boom in corporate profits and share values on the stock market, huge social problems fester and grow more malignant. The media, in its delirium over the spectacular bull market, ignores the worsening crises in health care (43 million Americans with no insurance), housing and education, and pays little heed to the growth of poverty, hunger and homelessness. The greatest impact falls on young workers and children, whose poverty rates are soaring.

The entire political establishment, including both big business parties, barely makes a pretense of concern for the plight of the great mass of working people. All of its policies are concentrated on sustaining a "business climate" which props up the stock market and favors the rich, through tax cuts for the wealthy and the gutting of social programs.

Beneath the surface veneer of prosperity, the class contradictions of American society are intensifying. In the final analysis such levels of social inequality are incompatible with democracy. A political establishment that is neither willing nor able to meet the needs of the vast majority of the population is increasingly compelled to rely on brute force to defend the economic elite.

It is no accident that the economic changes of the last 20 years have been accompanied by the ascendancy of the

politics of reaction and repression: law-and-order, the criminalization of the poor, the prosecution of children as adults. The glorification of the capitalist market finds its most grotesque political expression in the assembly line of state executions, occurring almost on a weekly basis.

Political reaction at home goes hand in hand with the growth of militarism abroad. Is it a mere coincidence that the advanced industrialized country with the highest percentage of its population locked up behind bars is also the world's biggest international bully? The modus operandi of American foreign policy--attacking one weak and virtually defenseless nation after another--is entirely in keeping with the methods of brutality and repression employed against large sections of the population at home. The eruption of US militarism now finds its bloody expression in the NATO war against Yugoslavia.

The Clinton administration is making clear that the war in the Balkans is only the first of many future military interventions around the world which the United States will conduct in the name of "human rights." But as the worldwide campaign against the frame-up of Mumia and the growing international criticism of US executions and police murders demonstrate, America is increasingly becoming the symbol, not of freedom and human rights, but of police brutality, social reaction and racism.

Social inequality and political repression at home, imperialist war abroad--these conditions will inevitably produce great struggles within the United States. There are already many indications of rising popular discontent. Thousands of working people and youth in the US and internationally are participating in protests and work stoppages to demand Mumia's freedom. In New York City numerous protests have been carried out against the police murder of the 22-year-old African immigrant, Amadou Diallo. Despite the lies of the Pentagon, the White House and the news media, there is growing discontent over the war in the Balkans.

Those who wish to defend Mumia Abu-Jamal and oppose the abuse of democratic rights must find the means to link his case in the consciousness of broad layers of the population to the great social issues which masses of working people confront. The central issue is question of program, perspective and leadership. On what political basis must this struggle be pursued?

The great lesson of the movements of the 1960s is that the evils of American society cannot be redressed simply through protests and moral appeals to the powers-that-be. As long as the economic and political power remains in the hands of the ruling elite, social justice cannot be attained.

The Clinton administration has been the clearest proof of the dead-end of a political perspective that accepts the

domination of the working people by the two big business parties, and bases itself on appeals to the Democratic Party in particular. Clinton has championed the death penalty and law-and-order repression, while embracing anti-democratic proposals from the Effective Death Penalty Act, to so-called anti-terrorism bills, to attacks on immigrants' rights. Nor can the judiciary, which has become a bastion of the ultra-right, be relied on to provide justice.

The great social force that has the potential to fundamentally change society in the interests of the vast majority of the people is the working class. But this can only occur when working people unite as an independent political force by breaking with the Democrats and building a mass political party of their own. Such a party, based on a socialist program, must fight for economic justice and social equality, for an end to racism and an expansion of democratic rights, above all by establishing the democratic control of the working people over society's resources.

The key to building a movement to free Mumia is to turn to the masses of working people on the basis of an independent political program that addresses the great social issues of the day: the fight for jobs, housing, education and health care, and the struggle against militarism. On the basis of such a struggle, ever broader layers of the population will come to understand that the same forces that are victimizing Mumia are victimizing the entire working class, and that the law-and-order witch-hunt against directed against him is aimed at the rights of all working people.

No one should underestimate the determination of the authorities, or the seriousness of the struggle that lies ahead. In so far as the fight to defend Mumia identifies itself with the broadest layers of working people and provides them with a political road forward, the struggle to save him will be enormously strengthened.

See Also:

The political issues in the fight to defend Mumia Abu-Jamal
[26 February 1999]



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