

Tens of thousands rally in Philadelphia for political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal

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Tens of thousands of demonstrators rallied outside Philadelphia's city hall and marched through the streets of the city April 24 to demand a new trial and freedom for Mumia Abu-Jamal, the death row political prisoner framed up more than 17 years ago in connection with the shooting death of a police officer.

While the Philadelphia Police Department gave its estimate of the crowd as between 8,000 and 10,000, the throng packed around the city hall steps together with columns of marchers filling the streets easily numbered three times that amount.

The crowd was younger than at most recent protests, with students marching behind banners from Howard University in Washington, DC, City College of New York and other schools, together with delegations from as far away as Minneapolis, Minnesota and Austin, Texas. For many it was their first national demonstration and they came to protest not only the planned execution of Mumia Abu-Jamal, but issues of social injustice ranging from police brutality and the death penalty to the ongoing war in Yugoslavia.

A group of more than 50--including a member of the European Parliament, representatives of the French Communist Party and a leader of the CGT union federation--flew in from Paris for the rally. Simultaneous demonstrations were also held in San Francisco, Puerto Rico, Canada, Australia and Italy on April 24, which marked Mumia Abu-Jamal's forty-fifth birthday.

The hostility of official Philadelphia to the demonstration and its determination to see the black activist put to death found expression the night before the demonstration at a \$100-a-ticket event for a police-backed group called "Justice for Police Officer Daniel Faulkner," which is dedicated to seeing Mumia Abu-Jamal executed. Attending the rally were Philadelphia's

Mayor Ed Rendell, US Senator Allen Specter, Pennsylvania state Attorney General Mike Fisher, Lt. Gov. Mark Schweiker and other officials. The master of ceremonies was Philadelphia's Police Commissioner John Timoney.

At the benefit Mayor Rendell, who was the district attorney at the time of Mumia Abu-Jamal's trial, offered an unintentionally revealing criticism of those fighting against the political prisoner's execution.

"There are hundreds of people on death row in Pennsylvania who have been convicted with less overwhelming evidence than Mumia, but they don't write poems and Ed Asner doesn't support them," he said.

It is precisely the conviction that the railroading of Mumia is not an isolated miscarriage of justice, but rather representative of a repressive judicial system that regularly sends innocent people to jail and even to their deaths, which animated many of the protesters outside city hall.

Police Commissioner Timoney issued his own threat of repression on the eve of the march, announcing that 300 cells had been cleared out in the police headquarters to accommodate demonstrators, and that the building's cafeteria was being turned into a makeshift court to summarily prosecute anyone arrested during the protest. In the end, however, there were no confrontations between demonstrators and police.

Among the most moving presentations given by a long line of speakers at the rally came from the Abu-Jamal's son, Mazi Jamal, 21. Fighting back tears, he said, "I'm the little boy in the picture," referring to a photograph widely reproduced on posters, T-shirts and buttons visible throughout the march. "I was only four years old then. The wheels of justice have been turning very slowly to free my father.

"The time I have lost with my father was because of his beliefs," he continued, "because this country does not believe in the things my father does, like equality of all people."

Leonard Weinglass, Mumia Abu-Jamal's attorney, noted that the demonstration was taking place at the same site where 17 years ago "Mumia Abu-Jamal was brought handcuffed and shackled to stand before a judge who has put more people on death row than any other judge in the United States."

Weinglass said that this was the sixteenth birthday that Mumia had spent on death row under conditions "so violative of human rights that two men asked to be executed, and Governor Ridge obliged." A third prisoner asked recently to be put to death and an execution date has been set for next month.

He pointed out that Abu-Jamal is 1 out of 126 people from Philadelphia facing a death sentence. Statistically, he said, a young black man in Philadelphia is eight and a half times more likely to end up on death row than in any one of the southern states in the US.

Reporting that he had filed a request for a review of the case by the Supreme Court just two days earlier, Mr. Weinglass cautioned that he was not optimistic that the high court would intervene. Given its failure to take action, he said, Governor Ridge would set a new date for Mumia Abu-Jamal's execution some time this year.

He has one more federal appeal, which will cause the execution date to be set aside for a limited time. Mr. Weinglass said he would ask the federal court to open up secret files on the case, the contents of which have been unavailable to defense lawyers for the past 17 years.

Information held in similar files was used to prove the innocence and obtain freedom for former Black Panther Party members Geronimo Pratt in California and Dhoruba Bin-Wahad in New York.

Pointing out that Mumia Abu-Jamal is only one of 3,500 people now on death row in the US, Mr. Weinglass called for a nationwide mobilization against capital punishment. "In the 1980s there were 115 people put to death," he said. "In the 1990s this figure has quadrupled to over 400." He told the demonstrators, "They must be stopped and you will stop them."

Also addressing the rally was Zach De La Rocha, lead singer of the rock band Rage Against the Machine, which played at a benefit concert for Mumia Abu-Jamal

at the Meadowlands in New Jersey that was denounced by the state's Governor Christine Todd Whitman and the state police. He reported that he had recently testified on the case before the International Commission on Human Rights of the United Nations in Geneva.

"A crime is a crime," he said. "Whether it's a B-52 over Belgrade, or a sham trial and a lethal injection in Philadelphia, both murder innocent victims."

In San Francisco, meanwhile, more than 15,000 people marched from Dolores Park to a rally at Civic Center Plaza. As in Philadelphia, the crowd was dominated by students and youth. Also marching was a contingent from the International Longshoremen and Warehouse Union, which shut down the docks from San Diego to Washington state for eight hours by using a provision in its contract that allows it to take one shift a month for union meetings.



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