

Philadelphia mayor witch-hunts supporters of Mumia Abu-Jamal

Tom Bishop
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Right-wing political forces in Philadelphia have escalated their campaign against supporters of Mumia Abu-Jamal, the radio journalist and well-known opponent of police brutality and racism who has spent more than 17 years on death row. On May 28 the *Philadelphia Inquirer* announced that Mayor Ed Rendell's office had sent a letter to the Black United Fund of Pennsylvania, Inc. notifying the fund that it has been dropped from the city employees' annual charity appeal because of its support for the International Concerned Family and Friends of Mumia Abu-Jamal.

Founded in 1981, the Black United Fund gives grants to 20 nonprofit community groups each year, including the South Central Pennsylvania Sickle Cell Council, Philadelphia Black Women's Health Project and Hunger Services Network. One of more than a dozen charitable groups that participate in the city employees' Combined Campaign, last year the BUF received \$100,000, about one-fourth of its budget, from the Combined Campaign.

While the fund gave no financial aid to the International Concerned Family and Friends, it is one of several groups for which the Black United Fund provides technical assistance for bookkeeping and money management. In the last eight months, it has collected more than \$200,000 in donations for the Concerned Family and Friends.

Mayor Rendell said, "We will certainly not continue to allow them to raise money if, in fact, one of the agencies they are giving money to is an agency making a frontal attack on the Philadelphia Police Department." His deputy mayor, Kevin Freeley, said, the Black United Fund has a "First Amendment right to associate with anyone they choose. We also have a right to protect our employees from being solicited for funds for a group that lends support to a person who

murdered a city employee."

Rendell's decision was immediately hailed by the Fraternal Order of Police, which has been carrying out a national campaign to expedite Mumia's execution. Jim Wheeler, the first vice president of the FOP, said, "We're glad to hear the city took a stand. There are a lot of ways to support a lot of issues, but people contributing to this campaign seem to us a little outrageous."

Other charities participating in the Combined Campaign expressed concern over the political victimization of the Black United Fund. Susan Higginbotham of the AIDS Fund said other charities that are connected to abortion services, gay and lesbian rights and other controversial issues could be similarly targeted.

The campaign against the Black United Fund was initiated by the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, which published an editorial May 13 entitled "Cut Abu-Jamal ties." The paper suggested that the Rendell administration could use the fact that the fund had allegedly allowed its state charity registration to elapse as the pretext to remove it from the Combined Campaign. But as one of its readers wrote to the paper, "These attacks have nothing whatever to do with any supposed improprieties in the fund's donations. It is because they dared to support the critics of the trial, because they have sought in a small way to block the railroad, that they have come under attack."

For his part, Mayor Rendell has a long association with the persecution of Abu-Jamal. He was district attorney during Abu-Jamal's 1982 trial when prosecutors intimidated witnesses into giving false testimony and concocted other evidence to frame up Mumia for the shooting death of city police officer Daniel Faulkner.

This latest attempt to intimidate supporters of Mumia's defense campaign follows an April 24 rally that brought tens of thousands of students, workers and others to Philadelphia to demand a new trial for Mumia and his release. Since then the news media and city authorities, working along with the police and other right-wing forces pushing the political prisoner's execution, have become increasingly provocative in their attempts to counter the growing support for Mumia. On May 24, 12,000 motorcycle riders, escorted by state troopers and officers from 50 police departments in New Jersey and Pennsylvania, drove through the streets of Philadelphia in an event called the Daniel Faulkner Memorial Run. Featured speakers at the rally that followed were Philadelphia Police Commissioner John Timoney and Faulkner's widow, who was flown in from California for the event.

The trampling of the free speech rights of the Black United Fund is consistent with the pattern of attacks used by anti-Mumia forces. Last January New Jersey Governor Christine Todd Whitman denounced a benefit concert for Abu-Jamal held in East Rutherford and a bill was introduced into the state legislature demanding that profits from the event be diverted into police charities. Organizations like the Fraternal Order of Police have also sought to prevent proceeds from Mumia's books, which they denounce as "blood money," from being used by his attorneys to fight for a new case.

Currently, Abu-Jamal's case is on appeal to the US Supreme Court challenging the legality of court procedures in his original trial. At the time of his arrest, Mumia had been a well-respected radio journalist who was known as the "voice of the voiceless" for his exposure of police brutality during the notorious administration of Mayor Frank Rizzo. Since his arrest he has continued to write and speak against the death penalty and inhuman prison conditions, making him a focal point of an international campaign against capital punishment and the erosion of democratic rights.



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