US media attempts to discredit campaign for Mumia Abu-Jamal

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During the past week major media outlets in the United States have revived their efforts to discredit the international campaign for the freedom of political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal. The former member of the Black Panthers and outspoken opponent of police brutality and racism has been on Pennsylvania's death row since his 1982 conviction on false charges of murdering Philadelphia police officer Daniel Faulkner.

On Sunday, July 11, ABC Television rebroadcast its "20-20" program on Mumia's case, first aired in December 1998, along with what it called additional evidence proving Abu-Jamal's guilt. This followed within days the appearance of the August edition of *Vanity Fair* magazine, which carried a feature article by Buzz Bissinger that also argued that Abu-Jamal had murdered the Philadelphia cop.

Both stories presented the police department's version of the facts and all but ignored the glaring contradictions that Abu-Jamal's attorneys and supporters have pointed to as the basis of their demand for a new trial. Bissinger and ABC-TV's White House correspondent Sam Donaldson, who presented the "20-20" segment, both claimed that the international support for Mumia was based on ignorance of the facts and that Mumia's supporters had repeated lies so many times, that they had been taken for truth.

Both the ABC-TV and *Vanity Fair* stories featured the policeman's widow, Maureen Faulkner, portraying her as a victim of a brutal crime who is waging an almost single-handed struggle against Abu-Jamal's vast "propaganda machine." In reality, Faulkner has become a national spokesperson for the Fraternal Order of Police (FOP), right-wing Republicans and others who have made Mumia the only inmate on death row who has had a well-financed campaign established to expedite his execution.

The supposedly new evidence presented by ABC-TV and *Vanity Fair* is no more convincing than the old. It centers on the claims made by Philip Bloch, a member of a prison reform organization, who visited Mumia Abu-Jamal in Huntingdon state prison in 1991 and 1992. Bloch told *Vanity Fair* magazine that he asked Abu-Jamal if he had any regrets over killing the policeman, and that Mumia supposedly said "yes."

Bloch said he has come forward, seven years later, because of the massive pro-Abu-Jamal Philadelphia rally that was held in April and because Mumia's supporters were "trying to vilify the memory of [Maureen Faulkner's] husband and make it seem like he was some rogue cop." He added, "I see a level of hatred that's being aroused in people towards the police. And I think it's just crossed the line."

Bloch said he contacted the Internet web site, Justice for Police Officer Daniel Faulkner, which is supported by the FOP, and eventually spoke with Faulkner, who put him in touch with *Vanity Fair* magazine and ABC News. Since then Bloch has spoken on right-wing radio talk programs, including that of Michael Smerconish, a former lawyer for the FOP who has campaigned against Abu-Jamal, and been contacted by 20 different media stations.

In a July 10 statement Abu-Jamal answered Bloch's claims, saying, "Once again we hear about a so-called confession.... A lie is a lie whether made today or 10 years later.... I find it remarkable that this rumor turned lie was never brought to my attention by the author [Bissinger], by Mr. Bloch himself or by *Vanity Fair* magazine, which never contacted me. Welcome to snuff journalism. If ever one needed proof of the state's desperation, here it is."

A key element in the prosecution's 1982 case against Abu-Jamal was the claim that a policeman and a security guard had overheard him confess to the killing in a hospital emergency room the night of the shooting. But reports of the supposed "confession" did not emerge until 77 days later. On the night of the incident the officer in charge of Mumia at the hospital wrote in his report, "the Negro male made no comments," and this was confirmed

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by the attending physician.

The media has intensified its campaign against Abu-Jamal in the aftermath of the failed attempt by the FOP and right-wing politicians, including House Majority Whip Tom Delay, to prevent Evergreen State College students in Olympia, Washington from hearing a taped address from Abu-Jamal at their commencement ceremony last month. At the time, college President Jane Jervis defended the decision of students to invite Abu-Jamal to speak because, she said, he has used his free speech rights to “galvanize an international conversation about the death penalty, the disproportionate number of blacks on death row, and the relationship between poverty and the criminal justice system.”

The arguments by ABC News and *Vanity Fair* that Mumia's supporters have a “propaganda machine” with unlimited resources turns the world upside down. ABC-TV is owned by Walt Disney Corporation and *Vanity Fair* is produced by the magazine publishing conglomerate Condé Nast (*Vogue, GQ, Mademoiselle, Self*). As for objectivity, a letter from ABC-TV to Pennsylvania prison officials in June 1998, requesting an interview with Abu-Jamal for the original showing of “20-20,” demonstrates the network's bias against the political prisoner:

“Presently, the only information available to the public regarding Mumia Abu-Jamal is the following: the one-sided HBO documentary *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt;* Jamal & his attorney's many books and recordings; vast pro-Mumia internet sites; and your typical evening news two minute pieces featuring celebrity sound bites. We are currently working with Maureen Faulkner and the Philadelphia Fraternal Order of the Police. We would like to balance this with an interview with Jamal, himself.... An interview granted to ABC News anchor, Sam Donaldson, could help disclose the truth and facts of the story. Mr. Donaldson has a long history of effectively confronting convicted killers such as Nazi Erik Preibke and Randy Weaver.”

The *Vanity Fair* article attempted to discredit the well-known fact that Mumia was targeted by police because of his exposures of police brutality, first as a reporter for the Black Panthers' newspaper and then as a radio journalist. Bissinger quotes George Parry, who was in charge of a unit of the district attorney's office that was established in 1978 to prosecute police officers for excessive force, saying, “The notion that Jamal has been framed because he was a critic of the police is just a hideous lie.”

What Bissinger did not say was that Parry was hardly an objective source. Parry worked for District Attorney Ed Rendell, the city's DA who would later oversee the frame-up of Abu-Jamal in 1982, and then become Philadelphia's mayor. Rendell, who started his career under the administration of police chief turned Mayor Frank Rizzo, was instrumental in covering up the misconduct of the police and prosecutor's office that had become so notorious that the federal Justice Department sued the city to end police brutality.

Bissinger has a good reason for covering up this connection. He is a longtime reporter for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and a publicist for Mayor Rendell. Two years ago Bissinger published a book entitled *A Prayer for the City*, which praised the Democratic mayor for “saving Philadelphia” by making major cuts in social programs and attacking public employees. Rendell, who plans to seek higher public office, is an active proponent in pushing for Mumia's execution.

The campaign by the US media to shift public opinion against Mumia Abu-Jamal is being intensified. Pennsylvania Governor Thomas Ridge is expected shortly to issue a new death warrant for Mumia and the Supreme Court is currently considering an appeal from Mumia's attorneys.

There is growing hostility on the part of the political and media establishment because Mumia's case has become a focal point of struggle in the United States and internationally against the death penalty and has raised the connection between the law-and-order policies of both political parties and growing social inequality. It is all the more crucial, therefore, that the campaign for a new trial and Mumia's freedom be broadened to involve wider layers of working people, youth and students.

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