

Conference organizers direct Mumia Abu-Jamal defense campaign to Democratic Party

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An Emergency National Conference to Save Mumia Abu-Jamal was held in New York City on February 19 to discuss the campaign for a new trial and freedom for the US political prisoner. In the course of the meeting a number of speeches from the platform brought into sharp relief critical issues concerning the defense of Abu-Jamal and, more broadly, the struggle against capital punishment and the growing assault on democratic rights.

A former Black Panther and radio journalist, Abu-Jamal was framed up for the 1981 shooting death of a Philadelphia policeman and condemned to die. The campaign to save him has become an international focal point in the struggle against police abuse, racism and capital punishment in the United States.

Leonard Weinglass, Abu-Jamal's lead attorney, told the conference that the period up to the end of April or early May would be the most critical in the 18 years Mumia has been on Pennsylvania's death row. Federal Judge William H. Yohn Jr. is currently considering a habeas corpus appeal filed by Mumia's attorneys to overturn his state conviction and grant him a new trial.

Yohn is expected to rule in the next 60 days on whether he will consider new evidence, including testimony alleging that the police and prosecution coerced witnesses and concocted a phony confession. If Yohn rules against the introduction of new evidence, and instead relies on the findings of the original trial judge, the chances that the federal courts will overturn Mumia's conviction are remote. With the death row inmate quickly exhausting his legal avenues, a new execution date could be set by the end of the year.

The emergency conference was sponsored by a number of civil liberties groups and political organizations, including Amnesty International, International Concerned Family and Friends of Mumia Abu-Jamal, Workers World Party, Refuse and Resist and the Committees of Correspondence.

Two major political issues emerged in the speeches and accompanying workshops. The first was a political orientation to the Democratic Party. The second was an uncritical endorsement of the politics of the antiwar protest movement of the 1960s, which was presented as the model for a viable strategy to defend democratic rights today.

In her remarks, Monica Moorehead, a leader of the Workers World Party, placed emphasis on the May 7 rally for Mumia being held at Madison Square Garden in New York City. She announced with enthusiasm that Reverend Al Sharpton had agreed to speak at the rally, presenting this as a major advance for the defense campaign.

Sharpton has over the past several years moderated his public persona from anti-establishment rabble-rouser to respectable "civil rights leader" and member of the Democratic Party establishment. He is to be joined on the platform by a number of more old-line black Democratic politicians, including former New York City Mayor David Dinkins and Black Congressional Caucus leader John Conyers, as well as various celebrities and some prominent figures long associated with Stalinist organizations,

including former Communist Party USA leader Angela Davis.

This line-up of black Democrats, liberal celebrities and Stalinists mirrors the political alignment that was brought forward time and again during the anti-war mobilizations of the 1960s, and in virtually every protest movement since, to channel oppositional currents behind the Democratic Party. That the organizers of the February 19 conference were seeking to revive the type of politics that dominated the anti-war protests was confirmed by the remarks of Clark Kissinger, a former leader of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), who now heads Refuse and Resist.

Declaring that the 1960s protests had ended the Vietnam War, Kissinger said the "specter" of student strikes, civil disobedience and urban riots had to be revived. Only then, he argued, would "the rulers of this country—not for reasons of right and justice, but for reasons of protecting their own butts—back down on the case of Mumia Abu-Jamal."

There is no question that the broadest mobilization of working people, students and youth is necessary to fight for Mumia's freedom. But the political character of the campaign is critical. Those seeking to defend Abu-Jamal and oppose capital punishment must ask themselves: on what principled basis is such a struggle to be developed? Is it not essential that the perspective animating it attack the underlying source of the assault on democratic rights? After the experiences of the anti-war protests and similar protest movements of the past—whose underlying premise was to rely on the Democratic Party as a means of pressuring the state—is it really sufficient in relation to Abu-Jamal to propose more of the same?

Those who led the February 19 conference did not address such issues, and this is neither accidental nor surprising. A serious analysis of social, political and historical questions, upon which a viable strategy for the defense of democratic rights must be based, is inimical to the politics of radical protest that predominated in the 1960s and which the organizers of last month's conference seek to revive. Such superficiality and theoretical unseriousness are inherent components of their approach to political struggle. These characteristics serve a definite function, reinforcing reformist illusions in the efficacy of appeals to the powers-that-be.

To the extent that the conference speakers made any reference to broader issues involved in the case, they suggested that Abu-Jamal was simply the victim of racist policemen and judges, whom Kissinger referred to as the government's "first line of defense for their white supremacist system."

An abstract and timeless reference to racism, separated from any concrete analysis of changing economic and political conditions, becomes little more than a propaganda phrase. No explanation is offered for the persistence of racial discrimination and police brutality against minorities, outside of the premise, either explicit or implicit, that racism is embedded in the mentality of Caucasians. Underlying such a view is deep pessimism, if not an outright rejection, of the possibility that working people and the oppressed can be united in a common struggle across racial, religious and national lines.

What was the social and political context of Mumia's frame-up? Why have the courts refused to grant him a new trial despite the glaring contradictions in the prosecution's case? Why has there been ferocious opposition from all levels of government and the media to the campaign for Mumia's freedom?

Abu-Jamal's arrest and victimization were bound up with a sharp shift in the policy of the corporate and political establishment in the US at the end of the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s. At that time a consensus emerged within the ruling class that it could only reverse the erosion of US capitalism's previously unchallenged position in the world economy through a frontal assault on the living standards and democratic rights of the American working class.

Just four months before the arrest of Abu-Jamal, President Reagan fired 13,000 striking members of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO), unleashing a wave of corporate union-busting, mass layoffs, cuts in social spending and tax breaks for big business. The carrying out of this offensive against the working class required and was accompanied by an assault on civil liberties and democratic rights.

A whole series of attacks were launched against previous legal and judicial reforms, with the Supreme Court assuming an openly right-wing character. There was a return of labor frame-ups and violent strike-breaking by the National Guard and other forces of the state. In the name of law and order, draconian legislation was passed to strip defendants of legal protections, lengthen jail terms and try children as adults. The machinery of the death penalty was geared up and the pace of executions accelerated.

One of the most heinous examples of state repression occurred just a few years after Abu-Jamal's frame-up, in October 1985, when Philadelphia Mayor Wilson Goode ordered the bombing of the home of the MOVE organization—the back-to-nature group that Mumia supported—killing 11 people, including four children, and destroying an entire block of houses. That this crime was carried out by a black Democratic mayor is a measure of how far to the right the Democratic Party had already shifted, and how far the chasm had widened between that party, including its black representatives, and the masses of working people.

The assault on democratic rights was bound up with an enormous growth in social inequality in the US. The ruling elite understood that it could only accomplish a major redistribution of wealth in favor of the rich by strengthening the powers of the capitalist state, so as to suppress the inevitable resistance from below.

The frame-up of Mumia Abu-Jamal and the entire trajectory of his case can only be understood as a manifestation of this general shift to the right by the political establishment, including both the Democratic and Republican parties. Mumia's arrest occurred in a period of ascendant reaction, when the working class was suffering one defeat after another, largely because of the betrayals of the AFL-CIO bureaucracy.

It followed the exhaustion of the anti-war protest movement, at a time when the Democratic Party and American liberalism in general were accommodating themselves to the capitalist free-market nostrums of the Reagan-Bush administrations. This political context largely explains why Mumia languished for many years on death row, isolated and virtually unknown to the broader public.

What conclusions arise from this analysis? In the first place, it underscores the dead end of a political perspective oriented to the Democratic Party. Any serious review of the last two decades demonstrates that the Democratic Party has played a critical role in implementing the right-wing social policies initially spearheaded by the Republicans. Under Clinton's two terms in office the turn to the right by the Democrats has accelerated.

The average number of prisoners put to death each year during the Clinton administration has been three times higher than during the Reagan-

Bush years. In 1996 Clinton signed the Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act, which severely restricts the ability of federal judges to challenge the findings in a capital case from the state courts. This change in law, enacted to expedite the state killings of death row inmates, could have a crippling impact on Mumia's pending appeal in federal court.

For the Workers World Party, an orientation to the Democratic Party is no recent innovation. Although the WWP presents itself as a socialist party, it has long been aligned to the Democrats, particularly through its support for black Democrats, such as the Black Congressional Caucus. The WWP's fixation on the race question serves as a means of lending support to black and minority representatives of the political establishment.

A glorification of the politics that dominated the anti-Vietnam War protest movement reinforces the same reformist outlook. There is no question that the antiwar movement was a significant social phenomenon that played an important role in the ultimate decision of US imperialism to withdraw its troops from Vietnam. However, an acknowledgment of the significance of the antiwar movement by no means implies an endorsement of the political perspective that dominated it. On the contrary, if one objectively considers the aftermath of the anti-war movement, one is obliged to adopt a critical attitude to its politics, and reject the notion that fundamental and lasting changes can be achieved through mass pressure on the establishment, exerted through the Democratic Party.

The antiwar movement embraced millions of people and coincided with social eruptions in the cities, civil rights protests, militant labor struggles and a political crisis that culminated in the resignation of President Richard Nixon. Clearly this was a period of enormous crisis for American capitalism and its entire political structure. The question is starkly posed: why weren't the working and oppressed masses able to exploit this crisis and achieve lasting advances? Instead, within a few years, the ruling class was able to regroup and, by the end of the 1970s, launch a devastatingly effective offensive against the working class. How is this to be explained?

A major factor was the false political orientation provided by the leadership of the anti-war movement. They quite deliberately acted to prevent this movement from rising above single-issue protests and appeals to the Democratic Party. A pervasive view among radical organizations at the time was a rejection of the leading and historically revolutionary role of the American working class. Very often this took the form of crudely labeling white workers as racist, and rejecting any struggle to unite the working class on the basis of socialist policies.

In practice, the perspective of radical protest meant opposition to a struggle to break the political influence of the Democratic Party over the working class and build a mass anti-capitalist political party. In the name of political expediency, the organizations that dominated the anti-war movement rejected a fight for revolutionary and socialist consciousness among broad masses of workers, students and youth.

Thus the politics of the anti-war movement contributed in a major way to the political conditions which enabled the ruling class to launch a counteroffensive against the working class. When the ruling class sharply intensified its attack, first under Carter and then in a more concentrated form under Reagan, the masses of working people had neither a political organization nor a viable political perspective with which to defend themselves. After the protest movement had dissipated, the same two-party monopoly was in place. Politics reverted to the status quo ante, but on an even more right-wing basis.

Kissinger and others would point to the 1975 defeat of US imperialism in Vietnam as the vindication of the politics which they promoted during the antiwar protest movement. Yet if one takes the intervening quarter century and contrasts the social and political conditions today with those of 1975, what picture emerges?

Social inequality has intensified. The living standards of masses of

workers have eroded, with average weekly wages falling 12 percent below what they were in 1973. Tens of millions have lost their jobs through plant closings and corporate downsizing. Spending for social programs, such as education, welfare and housing, has been slashed to the bone. The prison population has more than doubled, with 2 million Americans behind bars. Police brutality is widespread and more than 600 people have been put to death since capital punishment resumed in 1976. There have been repeated eruptions of US militarism, from Central America to the Persian Gulf, Africa and Yugoslavia.

This balance sheet hardly amounts to a vindication of the politics that dominated the anti-war movement, or an argument for its viability in relation to the struggles facing working people today.

What then is the way forward in the struggle to defend Mumia Abu-Jamal? The starting point is the fight to broaden the campaign for a new trial and Abu-Jamal's freedom by winning the support and active involvement of wider sections of working people, students and youth. But to inspire such a genuine movement from below—that is, from the working class and oppressed layers whose interests objectively coincide with the fight against frame-ups, police brutality, racism and capital punishment—means to tap into the deeply felt social grievances of the masses, and raise their inarticulate and unfocused indignation to the level of a conscious political struggle against the real sources of their oppression.

It is a task not only of political agitation, but of political education as well. Workers facing the constant threat of downsizing and the relentless pressure of falling living standards, young people facing the decay of their schools and the prospect of years of low-wage, part-time or temporary labor, students facing soaring education costs and growing intellectual and political repression must be made to see the intimate connection between their plight and the escalating attack on democratic rights, symbolized by the state vendetta against Mumia Abu-Jamal.

This is a difficult political struggle. There is considerable confusion in the working class, including misplaced support for capital punishment. But beneath the confusion, the product of decades of domination of the labor movement by reactionary bureaucracies, there is a powerful wellspring of class resistance to the depredations of the profit system and its political representatives.

A genuine movement in support of Abu-Jamal, one that contributes to the development of a mass movement of working people, can only be developed by laying bare and patiently explaining the real class and political relationships in American society. It must oppose all the lies and illusions that have bedeviled the masses for generations. It must unequivocally speak the truth.

Hence it must, as one of its central tasks, unmask the Democratic Party and tirelessly expose its pretensions to speak for working and oppressed people. It must fight for the working class to recognize that its basic interests are unalterably opposed to those of the capitalist class, whose political representatives include the Democrats as well as the Republicans. It must encourage among working people a determination to establish their political independence from the parties of big business, by building a working class party that fights for a fundamental transformation of society.

Those who, whether in the name of expediency or racial politics, oppose such a turn to the working class and instead direct the fight for Abu-Jamal's freedom to the Democratic Party are offering the political equivalent of fool's gold. Far from such an orientation fostering the development of a genuine mass movement in defense of democratic rights, such a policy undermines and eviscerates it.

In the end, promoting the credibility of Democrats, black or white, who have proven again and again the worthlessness of their verbal support for working people and demonstrated their subservience to big business, only isolates the victims of the system like Abu-Jamal from their real base of

support—the masses of working people.

Those who want to defend Abu-Jamal and put an end to capital punishment must ask themselves: is it possible to defeat the attacks on democratic rights while at the same time perpetuating illusions in the very political forces responsible for those attacks?

To his credit, Mumia has insisted that his fate is linked to the struggle of millions of people against social injustice. The only viable perspective in the fight against inequality and injustice is the fight to break the capitalist two-party monopoly and build an independent party of the working class. Working people must be united as a class—black, white and immigrant—on the basis of a program to defend democratic rights and establish social equality. This means the abolition of the death penalty and dismantling of the repressive machinery of the capitalist state, and the establishment of a genuinely democratic society based on the rule of the majority—the working masses—not a wealthy elite.

There are no shortcuts in this struggle. In the final analysis, the fight to save Mumia and defend democratic rights depends on the development of the political consciousness of broad layers of workers, students and youth. This is the task to which the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* are committed.



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