

Thousands rally in New York in support of Mumia Abu-Jamal

Tom Bishop, Alan Whyte
19 May 2000

Some 5,000 supporters of death row inmate and political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal attended a rally May 7 in New York City's Madison Square Garden.

A former leader of the Black Panther Party and radio journalist in Philadelphia, Abu-Jamal was framed up for the murder of Philadelphia policeman Daniel Faulkner in 1981. He has spent 18 years on Pennsylvania's death row. Abu-Jamal's fight for a new trial and opposition to the death penalty have won widespread support in the US and around the world.

Advocates for Abu-Jamal's defense have documented the politically motivated nature of the case against him and the denial of due process that characterized his trial. Federal Judge William H. Yohn, Jr. is currently considering a habeas corpus appeal filed by Abu-Jamal's attorneys to overturn his state conviction and grant him a new trial. Yohn's decision is expected some time this summer.

The May 7 rally was sponsored by Millions for Mumia, an umbrella group of various organizations that is politically directed primarily by the Workers World Party and Refuse and Resist.

A promised mass counter-demonstration called by the Fraternal Order of Police of Philadelphia did not materialize. About 70 New York City police officers and supporters demonstrated across the street from the rally. Only a few policemen from Philadelphia attended.

The three-hour event included dozens of speakers from civil rights, student and youth groups, as well as leaders of Workers World and Refuse and Resist. Also speaking were former Attorney General Ramsey Clark and a number of artists and entertainers, including actors Ossie Davis and Ed Asner, comedian and activist Dick Gregory, poet Sonya Sanchez, and comedian Marga Gomez. Music was provided by Earth Driver, Mos Def and others. Significantly, the platform was also given over to former New York Mayor David Dinkins.

The event attracted a considerable number of high school and college youth, reflecting growing support for Abu-Jamal and opposition to the death penalty, police brutality, racism and attacks on democratic rights. The presence of these forces showed the potential for building a far broader movement of young people and working people in defense of Abu-Jamal and democratic rights.

However, the orientation of the rally organizers, particularly Workers World and Refuse and Resist, was toward what passes for the liberal wing of the Democratic Party, rather than the masses of working people. This was most directly shown in the prominent place given to Dinkins. In a subsequent report on the rally, *Workers World* newspaper favorably reported the remarks of Dinkins, who was described as New York's "first African-American mayor."

To open the rally, Ossie Davis introduced a taped message from Abu-Jamal who said: "We gather here today in protest and equally in celebration. We stand in protest of the death-oriented social order. We celebrate our united resistance rooted in the centrality of life, the necessity of justice and the radical determination for freedom."

He went on to say that in a nation where over 2 million men, women and children were in prison, freedom was a revolutionary word, concluding, "We stand for freedom, yes. And if you are here, you surely are opposed to the state's intimidation of witnesses, its erasure of fingerprints, its creation of false confessions."

The opening section of the presentation was on "The Rizzo Years," which placed Abu-Jamal's arrest in the context of his political activities as a youth during the years of Philadelphia's notorious police commissioner and then mayor, Frank Rizzo. It was explained that Abu-Jamal was radicalized when he was brutally attacked by the police while protesting a campaign appearance of racist presidential candidate George Wallace.

Philadelphia reporter Linn Washington recounted how police killings reached epidemic proportions while Rizzo was mayor in the 1970s. Philadelphia police shot and killed 162 people between 1970 and 1978. During just one year, 1974, Philadelphia police shot and wounded 148 people, more than double the number in New York City, which was five times the size. Washington explained that the frame-up of Mumia Abu-Jamal in 1981 was a continuation of the police brutality and judicial abuse that was well established in Philadelphia in the 1970s.

Romona Africa is the only adult survivor of the 1985 police bombing of the home of the MOVE organization, in which eleven people died, including five children. (This atrocity was carried out under the direction of Mayor Wilson Goode, a black Democrat.) Romona Africa told the rally that not a single official who carried out the MOVE bombing was sitting on death row, in contrast to Abu-Jamal, who committed no crime.

She was followed by attorney Michael Tarif Warren and C. Clark Kissinger from Refuse and Resist, who detailed the frame-up of Abu-Jamal.

Attorney and a former leader of the Black Panthers, Kathleen Cleaver, spoke of the FBI's COINTELPRO program, which employed government informants and provocateurs to undermine left-wing organizations. She said the FBI made the Black Panther Party one of its primary targets, promoting internal dissension, neutralizing the leadership, discrediting the organization, and preventing black youth from joining the party. She said the picture of Abu-Jamal in the FBI file showed him in a black beret and a black leather jacket at a Black Panther rally. His file number and the word "dead" were written on the back of the photograph.

Lawrence Hayes, a wrongfully convicted former death row inmate, said the fact that 86 people nationwide have had to be released because their convictions were overturned was evidence that the judicial system was unjust. Henry Gatson, who served 25 years in prison as a result of a frame-up, said it was very easy for the authorities to set up anyone they chose to target. He explained that he was alive today only because the state of New York did not have the death penalty when he was incarcerated.

Njeri Shakur, leader of the Texas Death Penalty Abolition Movement, gave an account of conditions in Texas prisons. She reported that 213 people had been executed in Texas since the death penalty was reinstated. She pointed out that 126 of these executions have taken place under

Governor George W. Bush, the Republican presidential candidate.

Shakur said, “They have executed a woman, a juvenile, an innocent man, a mentally ill man, and revolutionary activist Kamau Wilkerson this year alone,” and are preparing to execute another innocent man, Shaka Sankofa, on June 22. She said all 150 men on Texas’s death row were in a super-maximum prison. She described the conditions: the cells have solid steel doors; the prisoners eat, shower, and take recreation alone; there is no TV and no human conversation. “They live in absolute isolation,” she explained.

Leonard Weinglass, lead attorney for Abu-Jamal, cited polls showing that support for the death penalty has fallen dramatically in the last eight years. Nevertheless, in 1999 twice as many people were executed as in 1998, and in 1998 twice as many people were executed as in 1997.

Weinglass noted that the district attorney who ordered Abu-Jamal’s trial and death sentence was now the national chairman of the Democratic Party. He also explained the Pennsylvania Governor Tom Ridge, who twice signed a warrant for Abu-Jamal’s execution and indicated he would do it a third time, was now a frontrunner to be George W. Bush’s vice-presidential candidate.

A very moving part of the rally consisted of remarks by family members of unarmed black and Hispanic men killed by the police. The family of Patrick Dorismond—who was shot by New York plainclothes police on March 15—spoke passionately about the pain they continue to suffer, not only from the murder of 26-year-old Patrick, but also from his subsequent vilification by New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani. The mother of Aaron Forbes, killed by Lower Merion police in a suburb of Philadelphia, spoke of the murder of her college-aged son last January.

Nicholas Heywood, Sr. spoke of his 14-year-old son killed by police in 1994. He said, “Mumia must be set free and the cops who murder and brutalize our children must be tried, convicted and jailed. Stop police repression and the criminalization of a generation!”

The mother of Anthony Baez, who was murdered by the police in 1994, also spoke passionately about the brutal role of the police.

In sharp contrast to these moving accounts, former New York Mayor David Dinkins evoked boos and catcalls from a section of the audience when he stressed that “the vast majority of the women and men of the New York Police Department are good and honorable people who put their lives on the line for the rest of us. They have a tough and dangerous job.”

Ignoring a series of scandals which have exposed rampant criminality, brutality and corruption in police departments from New York to Los Angeles, Dinkins repeated the official line that the problem was a few “bad apples”—isolated cops who, in his words, “are rude, crude, and brutal and criminal.”

While condemning the abuse of police power under the current administration of Republican Mayor Giuliani (who defeated Dinkins in 1993), he praised his own administration as a model of police conduct: “Our program and so many others adopted by cities across the country put more cops on the street and offered young people alternatives to anti-social, illegal behavior.”

In point of fact, when Dinkins was mayor in 1992 there were four times as many killings by the police as occurred last year under Giuliani. Dinkins’ administration was also marked by corruption scandals involving whole police precincts implicated in illegal operations.

Dinkins’ speech exposed the contradiction between the stated purpose of the rally—to oppose police brutality and state repression—and the political orientation advanced by the main organizers. Dinkins bears direct political responsibility for the very social and political conditions against which those who came to defend Abu-Jamal and fight capital punishment were protesting. None of the other speakers offered any criticism of Dinkins’ remarks, or sought to disassociate themselves from this long-time political representative of big business.

The former presidential candidate of the Workers World Party, Larry Holmes, identifying himself only as a representative of Millions for Mumia, put forward the main proposals of the rally organizers for further action in defense of Abu-Jamal. These consisted of “packing the courtroom” when Abu-Jamal has his upcoming hearing in federal court, and lobbying the Republican and Democratic national conventions, to be held in late July and mid-August.

Workers World speakers make a practice of lending their reformist and pro-Democratic Party politics a militant and even revolutionary gloss by means of bombast. Holmes was no exception. But in this case the contrast between rhetoric and political content reached the point of absurdity.

Speaking of the conventions of two parties, both of which emphatically support the death penalty, law and order, social reaction and militarism—as will the presidential candidates they nominate—he declared: “This is where the fat cats, power brokers, governors, candidates and all the billionaires behind them will be. We’ve got to be at these conventions in the tens of thousands to force them to put a new trial for Mumia on the agenda.”

From Holmes’s own description of these gatherings, it is self evident that it would more realistic to propose the immediate establishment of a revolutionary workers government than to suggest that the Democratic or Republican party would even consider supporting Abu-Jamal’s fight for a new trial.

Such bathos underscores the dead end of the type of protest politics championed by groups such as Workers World and Refuse and Resist. A viable strategy to free Mumia Abu-Jamal, defend democratic rights and end state repression requires a fundamentally different perspective. It must be based on a struggle to politically mobilize the working class independently of all the representatives of the profit system. This requires the building of a party based on a socialist and internationalist program, which is the perspective that guides the work of the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site*.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact