

Break-in at Philadelphia office of supporters of political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal

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The leadership of the movement in support of death row inmate and political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal has been subjected to yet another attack on their right to organize in his defense, with a June 8 break-in at supporters' offices in Philadelphia. The attacks come at a critical time as Abu-Jamal awaits word from Federal Appeals Court Judge William Yohn on when the hearing will be held on his appeal for a new trial.

Mumia Abu-Jamal, a political activist and nationally respected news reporter during the '70s, was framed and sentenced to death for the December 7, 1981 shooting death of police officer Daniel Faulkner in Philadelphia. The gross unfairness of his trial and the bias of the Pennsylvania judicial system during his appeals has led to an international movement in his support. Recent developments in support of his case include invitations by four American universities to have Abu-Jamal make a taped statement at their commencement exercises, a unanimous resolution by the Belgian parliament on April 27 calling for a new trial, and support from Nigerian Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka who is in the United States to meet with Abu-Jamal.

The latest attack was at the West Philadelphia office of the International Concerned Family and Friends of Mumia Abu-Jamal (ICFFMAJ). On the night of June 8, someone broke into the locked office and took several boxes of important files containing financial records and lists of high-profile contacts. Other items in the office, including valuable office equipment, were untouched. A statement released by ICFFMAJ coordinator Pam Africa commented, "I believe that this was a government plan to disrupt our work." She added it closely resembled the FBI and police break-ins of political organizations during the 1960s and '70s. ICFFMAJ said the files are vital to their work and

could be misused if in the wrong hands.

This attack follows the recent draconian sentences administered to eight leaders of the campaign in support of Mumia Abu-Jamal. They were part of a group of 96 protesters arrested for civil disobedience to publicize Abu-Jamal's case at the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia on July 3, 1999. The eight had asked for a trial for what normally is treated as a misdemeanor. They were sentenced to one year probation during which they cannot leave their federal district, may be visited at their homes by probation officers at any time, must have full-time employment, must turn over financial records and must report to a probation officer once a month. (See "Federal magistrate imposes severe restrictions on supporters of US political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal": <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2000/jun2000/maj-j14.shtml>)

The break-in received extensive coverage in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. This is a marked change, as for over 18 years the *Inquirer* has editorialized for Abu-Jamal's execution and, until recently, did not cover the international movement in his support. This change may reflect a response on the part of the newspaper to a change in public opinion over executions and prison practices in the United States, and the unease within ruling circles over the implementation of the death penalty.

Contained in the *Inquirer* article, however, is clear attack on ICFFMAJ's right to raise funds for Abu-Jamal's defense. Until last year, the Black United Fund had been ICFFMAJ's main fundraising partner. As a charity, its tax-exempt status was important for the tens of thousands of dollars collected around the globe since 1991. On May 28, 1999 Philadelphia Mayor Ed Rendell announced the Black United Fund would be dropped from the city's annual charity appeal due to its

support of Abu-Jamal. Black United Fund stood to lose a quarter of its annual income as a result. (See "Philadelphia mayor witch-hunts supporters of Mumia Abu-Jamal" at: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/1999/jun1999/maj-j04.shtml>)

As a result of the attack, the Black United Fund withdrew as a manager of the finances of ICFFMAJ. Its appeal to be restored to charities to which Philadelphia city employees may donate is to be ruled on by city officials in the next few weeks.

To regain tax exempt status ICFFMAJ registered as a charity with the state of Pennsylvania last year and was granted nonprofit designation. They have not received a second designation, however, required of groups soliciting over \$25,000 a year. According to ICFFMAJ member Bob Harris, the stolen materials contained key information as part of the group's effort to obtain tax-exempt status.

In the ICFFMAJ statement, Pam Africa said this is not the first burglary suffered by the group. One of their cars was broken into in 1999 and, while the car radio was left intact, sensitive documents were taken. In 1995 a fire of mysterious origins broke out in a vacant building next to the ICFFMAJ office which spread to the top floor. Firemen left a hose running in the basement where records were stored, even though there was no fire in that part of the building.

ICFFMAJ cautioned other groups working on Abu-Jamal's case to be wary of similar break-ins to their offices.

Africa also said the timing of the burglary was suspicious since the position of Executive Office Manager for ICFFMAJ had just changed hands. She said similar tactics of creating dissension between members in an organization were used by the FBI as part of COINTELPRO by "sowing the paranoia that often became COINTELPRO's biggest weapon in the 1960s and 1970s." COINTELPRO was initiated in 1968 by FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, and carried out infiltration of the Black Panther Party and other groups, leading to the murder of dozens of members of the Black Panthers.

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