

Death penalty opponents hold press conference in Philadelphia

Tom Bishop
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As part of Tuesday's day of protest against the death penalty during the Republican National Convention, a press conference was held on the theme "Democracy and the Death Penalty: Challenging the Republican and Democratic Convention Assumptions."

In opening the press conference, moderator Mark Taylor, founder and coordinator of Academics for Mumia Abu-Jamal, disputed that morning's editorial in the Philadelphia *Inquirer*, which claimed that the movement for a new trial for the former Black Panther and death row inmate was "a ball and chain around the anti-death penalty movement."

Taylor said his organization had found that its newspaper ads in support of Abu-Jamal were "a window onto the larger issues, not only the death penalty, but also the prison-industrial complex."

The first speaker was Marcus Rediker, associate professor of history at the University of Pittsburgh. He co-authored a recently published book entitled *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic*, the major theme of which is the place of the death penalty in the founding of the American colonies and its role in the new nation after 1776.

Rediker stated, "There is a fundamental but very seldom acknowledged truth, that the death penalty in America is a legacy of slavery. The very same slavery that has been the greatest obstacle to the achievement of democracy in the United States."

He went on to discuss the centrality of the death penalty to the maintenance of slavery in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries in America. Rediker explained, "Dissident slaves, those who dared to rebel, were routinely burned at the stake in order to create an atmosphere of terror on which the plantation system and port cities like Philadelphia depended."

He pointed out the death penalty is banned in much of

the world and yet practiced with "increasing vengeance" across the United States. He noted that none of the 12 states that do not have the death penalty are in the South, while half of America's death row population comes from the 10 Southern states, and five out of every six men and women executed have been put to death in Southern states. Rediker said, "The death penalty thrives where slavery was strongest."

He concluded with a statement by Dr. Benjamin Rush, a colonial Philadelphian and signer of the Declaration of Independence, who said, "An execution in a republic is like a human sacrifice in a religion."

Farah Jasmine Griffin, associate professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania, spoke on conditions in Philadelphia. Griffin stated that blacks in Philadelphia were four times as likely as whites to receive the death penalty. She continued, "There is no greater threat to democracy than the state legally killing its citizens. It is poor whites, blacks, and Latino men and women, and if some have their way, it will be children who have been accused of adult crimes as well, who sit on death row awaiting execution."

Griffin cited a *New York Times* article entitled "The Deadliest DA", referring to Philadelphia District Attorney Lynn Abraham, an avid proponent of the death penalty. Griffin said, "When it comes to the death penalty, I am passionate because we are so overwhelmed by cruelty and barbarism and most people feel the legal system doesn't work."

Author and teacher Jonathan Kozol opened by saying we lived in a time when the two major party presidential nominees supported the death penalty. He questioned what the Republican convention meant by Monday's theme, "Leave no child behind." The Republicans' definition of compassionate conservatism, he observed, was to execute as many people as possible and then say a prayer for their victims.

Kozol spoke about the inner-city neighborhoods in the South Bronx where he has been working and writing for 30 years. He noted that such neighborhoods provided a large portion of the prison population in the United States. He said, “Black and Hispanic neighborhoods are being used like gold mines, like human fish farms, to provide the fodder for the profitable prison industry. The massive incarceration of men and women of color must be the starting point of any serious discussion of the death penalty.”

Kozol said the South Bronx neighborhood where he has worked for the past seven years is Mott Haven, the poorest section of the poorest Congressional district in America. Twenty-five percent of the children in the neighborhood have to carry pocket pumps for asthma because of industrial pollution. Seventy-five percent of the men are unemployed. Rikers Island, a prison on an island in the East River of New York City, now holds 20,000 inmates, the largest inmate population in America. Ninety-two percent of New York City's inmates are black or Hispanic. One of the area's high schools, Morris High School, whose graduates include General Colin Powell, had 1,200 children in its ninth grade class, of whom only 90 would get to the twelfth grade, and only 65 would graduate.

Kozol added that conditions in New York revealed the nation's priorities. New York City spends \$8,000 per student per year for schools. In wealthy suburbs, the figure was \$20,000.

“But if this boy grows up enraged, indignant, tormented, and after all these years goes out some night and takes revenge on our society, commits a terrible crime and ends up on Riker's Island, then we'll spend real money—\$64,000 a year to keep a man on Riker's Island.

“If he commits a crime when he is 11 years old and gets sent into the spectacular, ultramodern block-long new children's prison which has just been built six blocks from his public school in the South Bronx, then we will spend \$93,000 a year to keep him there.”

Lawyer Robert Meeropol, the youngest son of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, who were executed in 1953 by the US government for “conspiring to steal the secret of the atomic bomb,” was the next speaker. Meeropol said Governor Bush should be known as Governor Death because he presides over the largest system of “the mass production of capital punishment in the United States.”

He went on to say that capital punishment corrupted democracy by putting the power of life and death in a few hands, even though many citizens did not trust these same

officials to make “a fair tax code, or even put up a traffic light.”

Meeropol said the rubber-stamping of Mumia Abu-Jamal's conviction by the Pennsylvania Supreme Court only revealed its corruption. He noted that Supreme Court Justice Ronald Castille was involved in prosecuting Abu-Jamal as district attorney before he became a judge, but refused to recuse himself from the case.

Journalist Julia Wright, the oldest daughter of author Richard Wright, came to the press conference from her home in Paris. She said she wanted to thank her father for taking her out of the United States as a child so she could view American culture from a distance. She said that if America persisted in the death penalty, it would become the “ugly America of the Cold War witch-hunts during the '50s.”

She went on to say that the scandal of the death penalty in the United States would not be so widely known if Mumia Abu-Jamal's case had not gained intense international attention. She noted that of the two million people in US prisons, 60 percent were illiterate or badly schooled, and Abu-Jamal was one of the few who could write about the reality of death row in America. She added that the president of the French parliament would be visiting Abu-Jamal at the end of August.

The question and answer session following the remarks of the speakers ended in a media frenzy when Jesse Jackson entered the room. He spoke of being present at the execution of Gary Graham, called for a moratorium on executions until the judicial system was “fixed,” and concluded with a call for the election of Democratic presidential candidate Al Gore.

A reporter asked why Jackson cited Bush's support of the death penalty as a reason not to vote for him, while he supported Gore, who also defends the death penalty. Jackson replied lamely, “The tent is big enough that we can have a civil debate.”



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