

Rubin “Hurricane” Carter: 1937-2014

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Rubin “Hurricane” Carter died Sunday at the age of 76 in his Toronto home after a years-long battle with prostate cancer. At the height of his middleweight boxing career, Carter, along with John Artis, became the victims of a racially-motivated frameup in Paterson, New Jersey and spent almost twenty years in prison for a crime he didn’t commit.

Carter received the nickname “Hurricane” for his formidable and aggressive style in the ring. In 1964, he was in contention for the world middleweight championship, losing the title fight to reigning champion Joey Giardello in a 15-round split decision. In his hometown of Paterson, Carter was known for his opposition to racism, and spoke out publicly against state repression of blacks.

In 1966, as racial tensions climbed in the US, Carter and a young acquaintance, John Artis, were arrested for the June 17 killings of the bartender and 2 patrons, along with the wounding of a fourth victim, all of them white, at Paterson’s Lafayette Bar, located in a racially tense neighborhood. Earlier that evening, a black business owner was killed by a white man in another part of town.

Carter and Artis were charged with the crime even though the surviving victim could not identify them. Because of his boxing notoriety and distinctive appearance, with shaved head and heavy mustache, which was unusual at the time, Carter was instantly recognizable.

No eyewitness or murder weapons were ever presented into evidence. The prosecution based its case on the unsubstantiated claim that the crime was carried out as an act of racial revenge. The testimony of two ex-convicts, Alfred Bello and Arthur Bradley, who claimed to have seen Carter and Artis leaving the scene, was the foundation of the case, despite the alleged witnesses’ confessions that they were engaged in a burglary at the time.

Carter and Artis were convicted twice of the same crime. After Bello and Bradley recanted their testimony in 1974, saying that it had been given in exchange for leniency by the local police, the Supreme Court of New Jersey vacated the convictions and convened a second trial. Bello was again the prosecution’s star witness, as he returned to his original story.

By the time of the second trial, the frameup case of Carter and Artis had become well-known. Carter wrote an autobiography in prison, released in 1974, which he titled, “The 16th Round: From Number 1 Contender to Number 45472.” His book reached a wide audience and his case was supported by Muhammad Ali and celebrities such as Ellen Burstyn and Dyan Cannon. Singer-songwriter Bob Dylan recorded and performed his protest song “Hurricane,” telling the story of Carter’s frameup to audiences all over the world.

The Workers League, forerunner to the Socialist Equality Party in the US, campaigned for the immediate release of Carter and Artis, along with another frameup victim, Gary Tyler, who has spent his entire adult life behind bars for a crime he didn’t commit. The League’s youth organization, the Young Socialists, held marches and demonstrations popularizing the demand for their freedom.

The second trial of Carter and Artis was attended by reporters from the newspaper of the Workers League, the *Bulletin*. After spending more than a million dollars in the trial, the state once again convicted Carter and Artis based on the testimony of Bello, and the two men were returned to prison.

After 14 years behind bars, John Artis was released on parole from Rahway State Prison on December 22, 1981. He rejected all attempts by the media to separate his case from Carter’s and vehemently denied that he or Carter were “rehabilitated,” since they were innocent of the crime. He told the *Bulletin* that the fight was not over, and wanted to thank those who stood by himself

and Carter.

Finally, in November 1985, a federal judge ruled that Carter's constitutional rights had been violated and that racism had been used to force through the convictions. Judge H. Lee Sarokin concluded in his ruling, "To permit convictions to stand which have as their foundation appeals to racial prejudice and the withholding of evidence critical to the defense is to commit a violation of the Constitution as heinous as the crimes for which Carter and Artis were tried and convicted."

A November 12, 1985 *Bulletin* editorial responded, "While this is without question, it hardly comes as a revelation from the judge's chambers. Thousands upon thousands of workers and youth had reached the same conclusion 10 and 20 years ago when Carter and Artis became two of the most well-known frameup victims and class war prisoners in the United States.

"Sarokin's ruling is in fact an admission that just such a "heinous crime" was committed by capitalist justice for two decades against Carter and Artis. "Not just the trial of Carter and Artis, but the whole of capitalist justice is "fatally infected" by the class system of exploitation upon which it is based."

Finally, in 1988, the Passaic County prosecutor formally dismissed the charges against Carter after losing its appeal to federal courts and ultimately the US Supreme Court.

Since his release, Carter made his home in Canada. He became active in the defense of other victims of the court system. He was founder and executive director of the Canadian Association in Defence of the Wrongfully Convicted from 1993 to 2004. He spoke frequently as an advocate for the rights of the wrongfully convicted. In 2004, he founded Innocence International.

Several books and a Hollywood film starring Denzel Washington have since been produced on the case of Carter and Artis.

Carter's codefendant John Artis was at his bedside when he died.



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