

Pennsylvania's "Mumia Law": New attack on political prisoners and new threat to freedom of speech

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On Tuesday, Pennsylvania's Republican governor Tom Corbett staged an event in Philadelphia at which he signed into law House Bill 2533 or the "Revictimization Relief Act," a thoroughly reactionary piece of legislation that will allow crime victims and their families to sue prison inmates for engaging in constitutionally protected speech.

According to Corbett, inspiration for the so-called "Mumia Law" comes from a commencement speech delivered at Goddard College in Vermont earlier this month by inmate and political frame-up victim Mumia Abu-Jamal. Abu-Jamal attended the small liberal arts college and gave the commencement address via a recording of a telephone call from the Pennsylvania prison where he is serving a life sentence for the alleged shooting of police officer Daniel Faulkner.

Corbett and "victims' rights" advocates claim that the speech, available here, causes mental anguish to the widow of the police officer whom Jamal was convicted of killing in 1981. Abu-Jamal has maintained his innocence and the case was marred by prosecutorial misconduct. His one-time death sentence was commuted in 2011 to a life sentence without parole. A more detailed review of Abu-Jamal's case is available here.

"Maureen Faulkner, Danny's wife, has been taunted by the obscene celebrity that her husband's killer has orchestrated from behind bars," Corbett said, referring to Abu-Jamal's commencement speech, interviews from prison and writings.

"He will not be able to have his little cottage industry from prison," said Ms. Faulkner, who appeared with the Governor at the bill-signing event.

Abu-Jamal's speech made no mention of his alleged

crime or of the alleged victim at all. Rather, the speech largely expressed the desire for social change and broadly commented on world events.

"The nation is in deep trouble, largely because old thinking, both domestically and globally, has led us into the morass that the nation now faces, which may be encapsulated by references to place-names that ring in our minds: Gaza; Ferguson; and Iraq—again! These are some of the challenges that abide in the world, which it will be your destiny to try and analyze and resolve. As students of Goddard, you know that those challenges are not easy, but they must be faced and addressed." Abu-Jamal said.

Abu-Jamal has given commencement addresses previously, much to the ire of law-and-order demagogues. He is a vocal critic of the criminal justice system and American capitalist society more generally.

Republican state legislator Mike Vereb sponsored the bill. In a letter calling on fellow members of the state legislature to support it, Vereb described the bill as follows:

"I am utterly outraged that such a reprehensible person would be able to revictimize Officer Daniel Faulkner's family with this kind of self-promoting behavior. I am asking your support for a bill, the Revictimization Relief Act, that would put an end to this kind of shameful misconduct."

In a chilling statement that underscores the antidemocratic motivation for the new law, Pennsylvania Department of Corrections Secretary John Wetzel said of Abu-Jamal's invitation by Goddard College:

"I cannot express my disdain enough about Goddard College's decision to allow this individual to be a

commencement speaker. We have a college allowing an individual convicted of murdering a police officer to share his opinions with impressionable students. This fact is very troubling.”

The Revictimization Relief Act not only allows lawsuits by crime victims against inmates; it goes so far as to empower district attorneys and the state Attorney General to obtain an injunction against “conduct which perpetuates the continuing effect of the crime on the victim,” a formulation so vague that it could prohibit virtually any free expression by a prison inmate. This sweeping language suggests that the law was not crafted with any consideration of whether it would be ruled unconstitutional by a court of law.

On the surface, the “Mumia law” may seem merely a political stunt by Corbett to whip up his reactionary supporters as the November gubernatorial election approaches.

More fundamentally, the act represents a brazen and direct attack on freedom of speech. In the case of Abu-Jamal, for example, the act could prevent him from criticizing any aspect of his trial or appeals process or incarceration, offering any political or social commentary, etc.

The vindictive decision to continue targeting Abu-Jamal reflects deepening authoritarian sentiment as well as fear within the political establishment. The attempt to silence a critic of the criminal justice system reflects nervousness in particular that respect for police and various other institutions is declining. The widespread revulsion at the police killings in Ferguson and subsequent attacks on demonstrators’ rights has not passed unnoticed by the ruling elite, whose answer to everything is: “More repression!”



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