

# *Abolish the Racist Death Penalty!*

## **Labor: Fight to Free Mumia!**



LAC

**ILWU shuts U.S. West Coast ports, leads 24 April demonstration in San Francisco to demand Mumia's freedom**

22 April—Mumia Abu-Jamal, former Black Panther and radical journalist, has been on death row in Pennsylvania for 17 years—framed for an act he did not commit by a vicious and racist system that aims to silence an eloquent critic. Mumia, whose passionate arguments on behalf of the oppressed have earned him a well-deserved reputation as “the Voice of the Voiceless,” is undoubtedly the best known death-row inmate in the U.S. today.

On Mumia's birthday, April 24th, hundreds of thousands of people around the world will be mobilizing in his defense. Many will participate because they know that an injury to one is an injury to all. Workers, minorities and all the oppressed share a common interest in defending those who are attacked for daring to speak out against oppression. Millions are following Mumia's case, especially on the West Coast of the U.S., where it is receiving considerable mainstream media attention. In a crucially important development, union militants have initiated several labor actions to promote his cause.

Saturday is normally a day in which a lot of cargo is moved on the docks on the West Coast, but not this week. The International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) has declared a “stop-work” in solidarity with Mumia for the day shift on Saturday 24 April in every port from San Diego to Bellingham (north of Seattle). This decision was made by delegates to a 26 March convention of the ILWU's longshore division. The convention also voted to ask ILWU members to join the demonstration for Mumia in San Francisco on that day. This action by a significant sector of the U.S. working class adds immensely to the impact of the 24 April demonstrations.

In January, members of a teachers' union in Oakland, California (the Oakland Education Association—OEA) defied opposition from the capitalist media, the cops, the mayor, school administrators and their own union president, to hold a teach-in on Mumia's case in their classrooms. The event, which was widely publicized in the local media, proved to be hugely popular among Oakland's predominantly black population, and, as a result, the OEA bureaucrats and school administrators did not attempt any reprisals.

Brazilian teachers in the state of Rio de Janeiro have declared one hour stop-work meetings on 23 April to “relate Mumia Abu-Jamal's situation with the need for an ongoing struggle against racism in all its forms around the world.” Many international labor federations (including in Brazil, France, Italy, New Zealand and South Africa) have also joined the campaign for Mumia's freedom.

For his part, Mumia is on record in support of a variety of labor struggles. In 1998 he endorsed the ILWU's campaign against a legal attack by the employers for an earlier demonstration of solidarity with striking dockers in Liverpool, England. More recently, Mumia refused a request for an interview by ABC-TV's popular *20/20* program because he supported locked-out camera operators and technicians, and did not want to speak with strikebreakers. In an interview with the ILWU's *Dispatcher*, Mumia explained:

“I had to ask myself, ‘Would I cross a picket line if I were living in quasi-freedom, and walking to the studio?’ The answer was an irrevocable, ‘no.’ How could I do less, even under these circumstances? I felt an intense affinity for the

people of NABET, and felt it was an important opportunity to express and dramatize my solidarity with them.”

### **Sinister Cop Provocations**

The struggle for Mumia’s freedom is gaining momentum, but it is also facing mounting opposition, particularly in Philadelphia. On 13 April, organizers of the planned “Millions for Mumia” demonstration in Philadelphia reported that they had learned Mayor Ed Rendell and the Philadelphia Police Department were planning to interfere with the 24 April demonstration. The city authorities have apparently decreed that only a “ceremonial parade” of some 500 people will be permitted to march from the site of the mass rally in front of city hall. At the same time, it was revealed that on the night before the mass demonstration, several major arteries would be blocked off in the city to facilitate a police “memorial dinner” for Daniel Faulkner, the cop whose death was pinned on Mumia.

Organizers of the “Millions for Mumia” demonstration denounced these provocations and vowed to go ahead with the march, with or without, official authorization. Pam Africa, of “International Concerned Family & Friends of Mumia Abu-Jamal,” condemned this decision:

“This racist city administration is forcing hundreds of thousands of people to come here to save the life of an innocent man....We are not coming on vacation. They have forced us to make this stand.

“Our voices will be heard, I am confident that people will come in even larger numbers when word of this outrage spreads. We have already set a precedent. Thousands of Mumia’s supporters have marched countless times to the site we proposed.”

The demonstrations in San Francisco, Philadelphia and other cities internationally build on the wave of actions which occurred in 1995 when Pennsylvania Governor Tom Ridge initially signed a death warrant for Mumia, slating him for execution on 17 August. The massive international outcry this produced forced the state of Pennsylvania to suspend the execution, only ten days before the scheduled date.

Mumia is once again threatened with imminent execution. He will soon file an application with the U.S. Supreme Court asserting that he did not have a fair trial. If this is not accepted, Mumia must resort to the Philadelphia federal district court, which will decide whether or not it wishes to hear new evidence in the case. The appeals process is almost exhausted and Tom Ridge, who remains governor, is as eager as ever to sign the death warrant.

### **Who is Mumia Abu-Jamal, and Why Does the Ruling Class Hate Him?**

Born Wesley Cook in Philadelphia on 24 April 1954, Mumia became politically active in his early teens. At 15, he helped to found the Philadelphia chapter of the Black Panther Party. After the Panthers collapsed, Mumia began work as a radio journalist, focusing on “history from below,” and editorializing against the injustices of capitalism. He was an outspoken opponent of police brutality and defended the Philadelphia-based, Rasta-inspired MOVE collective against a continuing campaign of police harassment. (This campaign reached its pinnacle in 1985 when Philly cops and federal police agents incinerated the MOVE compound, murdering 11 people.)

A little before 4 a.m. on 9 December 1981, Mumia, who

was moonlighting as a cab driver, witnessed a police officer assaulting his brother. He stopped his cab and rushed over. The events that followed remain somewhat confused, largely due to the state’s tampering with evidence and coercing witnesses. What is clear is that police officer Daniel Faulkner was shot dead and Mumia was critically wounded by a bullet from Faulkner’s gun which penetrated his liver and lodged against his spine.

The procedures undertaken by the cops and courts from this point on were clearly aimed at convicting Mumia, regardless of the evidence. The police failed to perform standard on-scene ballistic tests to determine if Mumia’s licensed handgun had even been fired. Other suspects picked up in the vicinity on the night of the shooting were forced to undergo testing for gunshot residue on their hands. Mumia was not. The medical examiner judged the fatal bullet to be .44 caliber. Mumia’s pistol was a .38. One of the two bullet shards extracted from the policeman’s corpse has been “misplaced” by the state. Numerous witnesses who initially testified for the prosecution have since recanted and allege that they were pressured by the police into fingering Mumia in the first place.

It is abundantly clear that Mumia did not receive a fair trial, even by the standards of the racist justice system. It is also clear from the evidence and the testimony of the witnesses that Mumia is the victim of a police frame-up. Witnesses who could have proved his innocence were not called and evidence that could have exonerated him was suppressed. His lawyer (an incompetent public defender who was subsequently disbarred) did not interview a single witness in preparation for the trial. The defense had no funds to hire either a pathologist or a ballistics expert. Black jurors were systematically removed from the jury, and a bogus “confession” was introduced.

The prosecutor at the original trial, Joseph McGill, also committed two gross procedural violations of Mumia’s rights by citing his membership in the Black Panther Party as “evidence” of his guilt and secondly by arguing in his summation that the jury should not hesitate to sentence Mumia to death because death-row inmates were not (at that time) being executed in Pennsylvania. Ron Castille, the district attorney who opposed Mumia in his first appeal, now sits on the State Supreme Court, which recently (October 1998) refused to hear a new appeal.

The judge in the 1982 trial, Albert Sabo, a life-time supporter of the Fraternal Order of Police, also conducted Mumia’s 1995 post-conviction relief hearings. Known as a hanging judge, Sabo had a reputation for handing down more death sentences than any other judge in the U.S. All but two of the people Sabo sentenced to death were members of visible minorities. Sabo conducted himself in a prejudicial manner toward the defendant and his counsel throughout the proceedings.

### **Capitalism and Racism**

The vindictive persecution of Mumia Abu-Jamal rests on two cornerstones of the American free enterprise system—racial oppression and political repression. Racism, a structural component of capitalism, is, in the U.S., a legacy of slavery. American blacks have historically been aggregated into the lowest paid and dirtiest jobs, and ghettoized into a “reserve army.” The super-exploitation of blacks has tended to depress all wages and white-supremacist ideology has also impeded the development of class-

consciousness among the white working-class:

“When American capitalism hit full stride after the Civil War, it had a ready-made labor reserve army in the multi-millioned black population, *already* branded from birth due to the ideology of racial inferiority handed down from slavery. Thus the *specific* features of American history combined with the *general* needs of capitalist development to create a black color-caste, forcibly segregated at the bottom of society.”

—“Black Liberation & the Class Struggle,”  
1917 No.8, 1990

The institutionalization of racism in American society is most glaring within the judicial system. Prisons have become a growth industry in the U.S. with over 1.5 million people, disproportionately black and poor, incarcerated. At the pinnacle of the U.S. criminal justice system rests the death penalty, the victims of which are also disproportionately black. Recent court rulings undercutting traditional *habeas corpus* rights have sped up the machinery of death.

### Political Repression in America: from Haymarket to Mumia

Mumia Abu-Jamal is a victim of more than just judicial racism. He was also tried and condemned for his political views. The U.S. ruling class does not generally flaunt the political nature of its legal system, and frequently charges the rulers of other countries with “human rights abuses” when they resort to the death penalty to silence political opponents. In general America’s rulers have found that bourgeois democracy represents the most effective and inexpensive form of government. So long as the capitalists do not feel any serious danger to their rule, they prefer the safety valve provided by bourgeois electoralism. The existence of democratic rights also helps maintain the illusion of rule by consent.

But the wealthy and powerful U.S. bourgeoisie has also periodically resorted to persecuting individual rebels in high-profile political trials. This record stretches from the Haymarket martyrs hanged in 1887 for leading the fight for an eight-hour day; to Sacco and Vanzetti, two anarchist immigrants sent to the electric chair in 1927 for a double murder they did not commit; to the judicial murder in 1953 of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg at the height of the McCarthyite witchhunt.

Even in wealthy imperialist countries which do not have capital punishment, the state often wields the power of life and death. Fatalities in custody, including suicide, are commonplace, as is death resulting from “accidental” shootings or beatings by police. Cops are on the front lines of the capitalist state. Their primary role is to defend private property and its owners which, under bourgeois democracy, sometimes means suppressing those deemed to be an ideological danger to the status quo.

To struggle for social justice, working people and the oppressed must recognize their enemies. Mumia Abu-Jamal has inspired tens of thousands of young militants with his courageous resistance to his oppressors as he continues to struggle, “live from death row.” His case exemplifies the link between the reality of racist oppression and the repressive functions of the state.

### IBT Active in Mumia’s Defense

The International Bolshevik Tendency (IBT) is one of a large number of organizations which have joined the battle



IBT marches in 24 April demonstration in Philadelphia

to free Mumia. Where our modest resources have permitted, we have sought to participate in building united-front actions to broaden support for Mumia’s freedom and to draw new layers into the struggle. Within the framework of joint action, we continue to argue for our own views of the lessons to be learned and the necessary political tasks.

In Toronto, IBT members joined with a variety of other leftist groupings in organizing a demonstration in Mumia’s defense on 14 November 1998, after Pennsylvania’s Supreme Court turned down his appeal for a new trial. Some 150 people attended the rally, organized under the slogans “Free Mumia Abu-Jamal! Down With the Racist Death Penalty!” Organizations sponsoring and speaking at this demonstration, besides the IBT, were Anti-Racist Action, Friends of MOVE, Ontario Coalition Against Poverty, Socialist Action and the Trotskyist League (TL—Canadian affiliate of the U.S. Spartacist League).

The same organizations (with the exception of the TL, which announced that it no longer intended to participate in building such events) have been joined by many more, including the International Socialists, the Black Action Defence Committee, the New Democratic Youth (youth group of Canada’s mass social-democratic party) and several unions in building a demonstration in Toronto on 24 April.

In England, IBT comrades have played a central role, along with some anarchist comrades and others, in initiating and building the united-front coalition “Mumia Must Live!” under the slogans of “Free Mumia Abu-Jamal! Abolish the Racist Death Penalty!” This coalition, established in London early in 1999, is publicizing Mumia’s cause across

the country, leafleting at many political events and building for a Sunday 25 April "Evening for Mumia" featuring speeches, comedy and music to coincide with the actions internationally. Endorsers of the campaign include the Liverpool dockers, Labour left MP Jeremy Corbyn, George Silcott (whose brother Winston was unjustly imprisoned by the racist police) and a variety of left groups including the Alliance for Workers Liberty, Anarchist Black Cross, Anarchist Communist Federation, Communist Party of Great Britain and Socialist Labour Party (Hackney branch). The coalition has also received support from branches and shop stewards within the public-sector union UNISON; the Rail, Maritime and Transport Union; and the National Union of Journalists (which made Mumia an honorary member in 1995).

Our New Zealand comrades initiated a "Committee to Free Mumia Abu-Jamal" in Wellington which includes leftists and anarchists among others. On Saturday, 28 November 1998, the Committee held a rally under the banner "Free Mumia Abu-Jamal!" to coincide with Thanksgiving Day actions in the U.S. The Wellington demonstration, which was supported by officials of the Trade Union Federation, drew almost 50 participants. The Committee is organizing a Mumia demonstration to coincide with the 24 April international protests.

Our comrades in Albany, New York have circulated a resolution among local trade unionists outlining Mumia's case and concluding:

"The Labor Movement of the Haymarket martyrs and the Ludlow Massacre, of Joe Hill and Big Bill Haywood, of Sacco and Vanzetti, and, more recently, of PATCO, the Decatur war zone, and the Detroit Newspaper strike/lockout calls for the immediate release of Mumia Abu-Jamal."

This motion was endorsed by the Albany local of the

American Postal Workers Union along with unions representing all graduate student employees in New York state and professors in Albany.

## The Power of Labor

In the San Francisco Bay Area, IBT comrades are involved with the Labor Action Committee to Free Mumia Abu-Jamal (LAC), which was established in February by trade-union activists from the ILWU and other unions to "educate workers and promote labor action" in the struggle to free Mumia Abu-Jamal. Jack Heyman, a key activist in the LAC, is also on the executive board of ILWU Local 10 and it was he who initially put forward the motion for the stop-work actions on 24 April.

The ILWU's protest, as well as the initiatives taken by teachers unions in Oakland and Rio de Janeiro, represent a major step forward in the defense of Mumia and the campaign against the death penalty. But they are also important for the union movement itself, which is hobbled by bureaucratic and conservative leaderships who often oppose action for anything but the short-term interests of their own dues base. The recognition by some sections of the longshore and teachers' unions that their interests are connected to achieving justice for Mumia is a most welcome development.

The fight for Mumia's freedom is of vital importance to every leftist, every trade unionist and everyone else committed to the struggle for social justice. Mumia's life can only be saved through mass protests to expose the hideous frame-up being perpetrated by Philadelphia's cops and courts. Ultimately the struggle to uproot the system of racist injustice which Mumia's case exemplifies requires the forging of a leadership in the labor movement committed to mobilizing workers and the oppressed to struggle for the expropriation of the expropriators. ■

## Mumia Awarded John Brown Medal

The following remarks were made by Larry Lawrence in presenting the John Brown Society's Gold Medal to Pam Africa on behalf of Mumia Abu-Jamal in front of an overflow crowd of more than 1500 at the Town Hall in New York City on 26 February 1999.

*We of the John Brown Society thank the organizers for the privilege of paying our respects tonight to the determined and courageous Mumia Abu-Jamal.*

*Our Gold Medal goes only to those who have suffered and sacrificed greatly for the sacred cause of justice for the poor. We speak in the name of one of the 19th century's greatest champions of the exploited slaves to honor those fighters today who demonstrate the same great strength of character that took John Brown to Kansas and Harper's Ferry. John Brown raised high the lamp of racial equality to light the pathway of mankind.*

*We feel that revolutionary fighters for social justice for the poor are the most important people on the face of the earth, and that they deserve all the love and respect that we can pay them.*

*I also want to point out that we do not give our award to the capitalist politicians of the two major parties. Their careers are about corrupted self-seeking and they serve as instruments for a brutal U.S. military machine.*

*We are above all romantics and dreamers. Argument and polemics have an important place on the far left, but we also*

*need poetry and classical eloquence as a part of our efforts. We can take the cause of social equality to a higher level by going back to the 19th century and learning from such figures as William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips and Frederick Douglass.*

*They were both fighters and lyrical public speakers. Wendell Phillips taught us that: "None know what it is to live till they redeem life from its seeming monotony by laying it a sacrifice upon the altar of some great cause." Leon Trotsky, in a different context, spoke for revolutionary fighters of our century when he said in 1938, that our highest happiness can be achieved when we have, "the consciousness that one participates in the building of a better future, that one carries on his shoulders a part of the fate of mankind...."*

*Mumia challenges each of us from his prison cell to stand on his broad shoulders and look with him into the vast future of mankind. A future of universal brotherhood and justice. We must set him free so that he can return to us and help us in the grand battle to make a better world for all working people. May the spirit of John Brown lighten his terrible burden in these difficult hours.*

*I say to him now that he stands solidly in the John Brown tradition. It is one of the greatest honors of my life to present the Gold Medal of the John Brown Society to Mumia Abu-Jamal.*