

Open Letter to Workers Vanguard

Disagreeable Sectarians

The following is an open letter to Workers Vanguard, newspaper of the Spartacist League/U.S.:

25 April 1999

Comrades:

As we have occasionally pointed out in the past, the Spartacist League/Partisan Defense Committee (SL/PDC) deserves credit for its pioneering work in publicizing the case of Mumia Abu-Jamal and organizing for his freedom. Since 1995 Mumia's case has won ever broader support within the left and labor movement internationally. Regrettably you have not seen this as an opportunity to engage in common work and political struggle with activists from other organizations. Instead you have tended to allow petty sectarian organizational considerations to take precedence over principled united-front activity to free Mumia.

The 16 April *Workers Vanguard* (WV) commentary on recent events in Mumia's defense campaign is a case in point. The article, headlined "Mobilize the Power of Labor! Free Mumia Now!," treats in an extremely cursory manner the exceptionally important work-stoppage by the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) on 24 April. *Every port from San Diego to Bellingham Washington was shut down for the day in solidarity with Mumia!* It is hard to overstate the importance of such an event—particularly in this period in which organized labor has been on the defensive. Yet this actual, living, mobilization of the "Power of Labor" to free Mumia is dismissed with a single paragraph buried in the text. You claim that it was organized so as "to minimize the cost to the company," but Saturday can be one of the busiest days on the docks. You also mistakenly report that the work stoppage was only for two hours, rather than for the entire day shift.

You grudgingly admit that it was, "a powerful statement of the social power" of labor to win Mumia's freedom. The ILWU's coastwide shutdown for Mumia was an action that, to our knowledge, is unprecedented in the history of U.S. labor for at least the last 50 years. Of course we look forward to the hypothetical "broader actions" that you project for the future, but this event was of *historic* importance, something you are clearly loathe to admit.

You reported that "the ILWU" had called for the action, but did not inform your readers that it had been initiated by Jack Heyman, a former SL supporter, who is currently on the executive board of the ILWU's San Francisco local, and is also active in the Labor Action Committee to Free Mumia (LAC), along with IBT comrades, former SL trade-union supporters and others. Many LAC participants played an active role in building the historic 1984 labor boycott of apartheid cargo in San Francisco. This boycott established an important precedent for the ILWU's recent action in defense of Mumia. The SL's shameful sectarianism in 1984 was thoroughly documented by three former Spartacist trade-union activists in "Third Period Robertsonism at Pier 80," published in *Bulletin of the External Tendency of the iSt*, No. 4, May 1985.

Brother Heyman is introduced in the WV article as someone "who postures as the left wing of the ILWU Local 10 executive board" and roundly denounced for having the

temerity to ask the "non-sectarian" PDC for a list of union endorsements gathered in the past for Mumia. WV admits that these endorsements were all a matter of public record, but still smears Heyman as someone whose real aim:

"is to go after the reds, in the service of the labor bureaucracy (whose seats Heyman et al. desire to fill) and of concealing the true nature of the capitalist state."

WV denounces the Labor Action Committee as a "veritable rogues' gallery" whose "visceral hatred" of the Spartacist League has led them to try to give a "labor façade to the class-collaborationist politics that define the 'Millions for Mumia' protests." The fact that Heyman (and the other comrades working in the LAC), through a combination of hard work and political skill made a vital contribution to sparking the most powerful act of labor solidarity in Mumia's defense to date, is completely ignored by WV which claims that the LAC:

"obscures the class nature of the capitalist state, deep-sixes any mention of the Democratic Party and completely obviates the centrality of the fight for black liberation to the cause of the emancipation of all of labor."

The willingness to employ such brainless slanders has a great deal to do with why the contemporary Spartacist League is so widely reviled on the left and has so little influence in the labor movement.

WV wraps up its denunciation of the Labor Action Committee with a condemnation of its appeal for labor organizations to:

"join the ILWU at the head of a demonstration whose whole premise is not the cause of mobilizing the social power of the multiracial working class for Jamal's freedom but rather one which appeals to the agencies of the class enemy for 'justice'."

The SL did not organize a contingent in either the San Francisco or Philadelphia "Millions for Mumia" demonstrations on 24 April and it is clear that you *opposed* mobilizing the labor movement (or anyone else) for these events. The ostensible reason for this sectarianism is that you disagree with one of the main slogans of the rallies (i.e., for a "New Trial" for Mumia). You prefer the call to "Free Mumia!" So do we. Nonetheless we do not see this as a reason to abstain from participating in national events that are many times larger than any rallies the SL/PDC has been able to organize. Of course we participate in these demonstrations with our own slogans, including the call to "Free Mumia!"

We recall that during the Vietnam War the SL marched in many demonstrations organized around clearly social-pacifist slogans, but carried its own placards calling for victory to the Indochinese Revolution. The ILWU contingent, which headed the 24 April demonstration in San Francisco, raised the call to "Free Mumia!" It did not, to my knowledge, call for a "New Trial."

WV approvingly quoted the remarks of a participant in an SL meeting last February who asked:

"How about somebody telling the truth, that there's no way that Mumia's going to get justice in the courts. It's going to be exactly the same frame-up bullshit that happened the first time."



S. STAPLER—RBD

Toronto, 24 April: IBT supporter speaks at 'Free Mumia' united-front demonstration

It is not impossible that a new trial could result in an acquittal. To assert otherwise is fake ultra-leftism. Fake, because the SL doesn't truly believe it. If a new trial can *only* result in "exactly the same frame-up bullshit," why is the PDC's Rachel Wolkenstein still participating in Mumia's defense team which has been pursuing every possible legal avenue, including trying to win a retrial? Furthermore, in the 1970s, the SL itself launched successful court challenges against infringements of its democratic rights by both the U.S. Secret Service and the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

The SL's abstentionism was not fundamentally dictated by the choice of slogans by the "Millions for Mumia" organizers. This is proved by the fact that both the London and Toronto united-front events held in conjunction with the Philadelphia and San Francisco rallies were organized on the basis of the call to "Free Mumia!" Yet in both cases, the Spartacist League's co-thinkers refused to endorse or help build the events. In London, where a solidarity night organized by the "Mumia Must Live!" coalition drew over 100 people, the SL did not send even a single supporter.

In Toronto, a united-front demonstration was held involving many of the same groups that had organized a successful 14 November 1998 protest to demand Mumia's freedom. On that occasion the Trotskyist League (the SL's Canadian sister section) had been an active participant in the united front. But although it was invited, it refused to attend the planning meetings for the 24 April demonstration. At one of these meetings, a proposal was floated to change the basis of unity from "Free Mumia!" to a call for a new trial. Our comrades, and others, argued against mak-

ing such a change and the proposal was shelved.

In Toronto, 150 people turned out to demonstrate for Mumia's freedom across the street from the U.S. consulate. Among the participants were ten TL supporters. Speakers from the endorsing organizations addressed the crowd, including representatives of the United Secretariat, the International Socialists, Socialist Resistance (formerly Labour Militant), the Black Action Defense Committee, New Socialists, Friends of MOVE, Nation of Islam and ourselves. TL members marched in the picket line, carried their own placards and raised their own chants. Two TL supporters stood in front of the rally with a large banner featuring a picture of Mumia and virtually identical slogans to those that the demonstration had been organized around. The absurdity of the TL's posture was widely commented on at the demonstration—they agreed with the slogans, turned out and participated in the event, but for some inexplicable reason refused to endorse or build it.

Such "tactics" are not likely to win many converts among the left. Most political activists regard the SL as a slightly ridiculous, frequently hysterical and generally disagreeable sect. The only purpose of the SL leadership's semi-abstention from the campaign to free Mumia can be to seal off their membership from excessive exposure to other leftists and social reality in general. In the process, the SL/PDC has managed to squander the political credibility it gained from its important early work in the fight for Mumia's freedom.

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