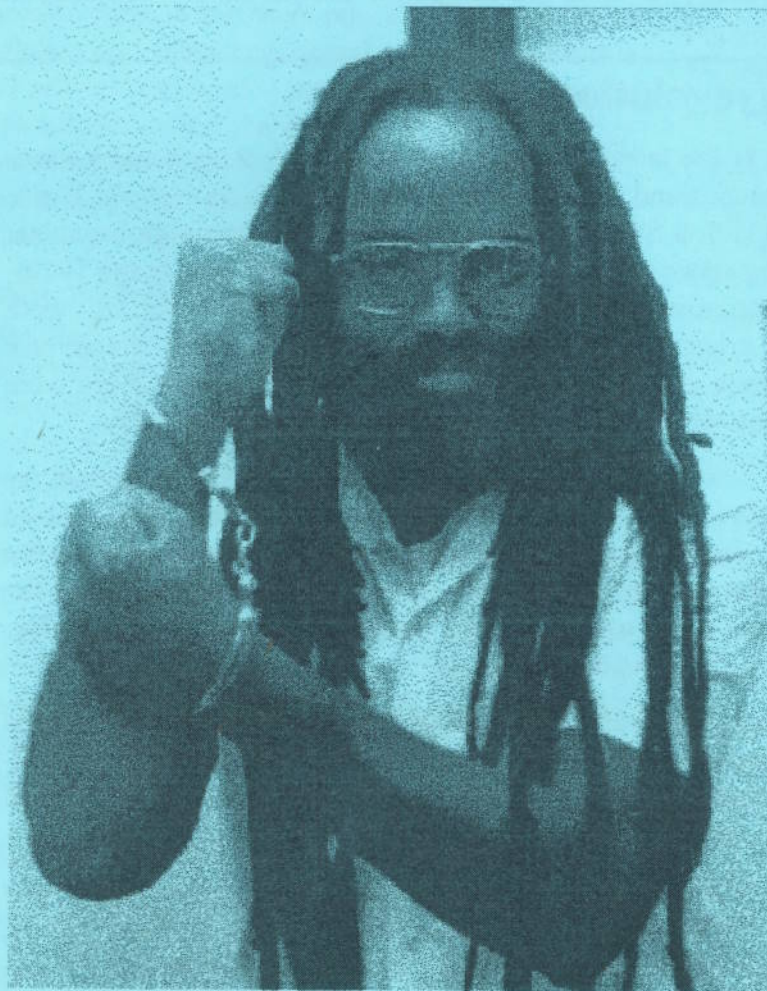


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# Brick by Brick



## Building a Movement to Free Mumia Abu-Jamal

Freedom Road Socialist Organization

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**THE STRUGGLE TO SAVE MUMIA ABU-JAMAL** is intensifying. On one side, the clock is ticking—for the second time, an execution warrant signed by Pennsylvania Governor Ridge has been set aside, but Mumia's last round of appeals is now underway. On the other side, the movement is growing—this April 24 saw twin demonstrations in Philadelphia and San Francisco, the largest held so far to demand justice for Mumia. Since then thousands of protests and other activities nationwide have turned up the heat.

The unfortunate fact is that we have entered the final round of the battle to save Mumia's life. As much as dedicated activists have accomplished so far, a qualitative leap is needed, and it is needed now. This pamphlet will look at some of the important issues we must face and the tasks we must take up if the struggle is to be victorious.

## **What does the attack on Mumia represent?**

We fight to save Mumia in large part because of what he represents. What he represents is also what makes the bourgeois state so intent on executing him.

Mumia is an African American revolutionary. As such, he is a nightmare to the white supremacist ruling class of this country. The rise of the Civil Rights Movement and the modern Black Liberation Movement in the US in the 1960s by itself posed the biggest threat their rule had seen since the Great Depression. It also struck sparks of rebellion in many other sections of the people. That firestorm of struggle in the Black nation was brought under control only by a combination of real concessions, social dislocation, ideological counteroffensives, murderous repression and co-optation of leaders, and the rapid creation of a relatively privileged middle stratum of professionals.

Because the capitalists' system cannot produce equality, let alone justice, or even basic democratic rights and economic security to the majority of Black people in this country, voices like Mumia's will always pose a threat. This is especially true because Mumia Abu-Jamai is such a clear thinker, incisive analyst and persuasive writer and speaker. He calmly exposes their greedy system and its racist crimes, and shows the need for resistance, for struggle, for uniting all who can be united against the common enemy, for revolutionary change.

By killing Mumia the rulers of this country hope to send a message to the Black community and especially our young people, and to everyone who chafes under their system—eat it and like it; if you resist, you will be crushed, fool.

## **The stakes**

In a very basic sense, then, the battle to save Mumia is a battle over whether or not the capitalist state can freely kill sworn enemies of the capitalist system or not. As the box below shows, history demonstrates

## **Executing revolutionaries**

Mumia's case is the latest in a series of celebrated death penalty cases with revolutionaries and communists as the target. Before World War I, the life of Joe Hill, a Swedish immigrant, revolutionary union organizer and singer-songwriter, was ended by a firing squad in Utah. In the 1920s, Italian American anarchists Wicolo Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti were the focus of a massive international movement against their executions. In the '50s, peace and justice activists Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were railroaded to the electric chair in spite of powerful global protests.

Like Mumia's case, these started out as small-time cases, with police trying to pin unsolved crimes on local revolutionaries. Joe Hill was accused of shooting a shopkeeper during a stick-up. Sacco and Vanzetti were charged with the murder of a guard during a payroll robbery. Even the Rosenbergs were swept up in the Cold War hysteria about Soviet spying, and not initially the principal targets of it.

But as progressives rallied to their support and the spotlight was turned on the bogus nature of the evidence against the defendants and the railroad being perpetrated by the state, the stakes got higher, much higher. Local criminal cases became national political battles.

For the rulers of this country, what was and is being challenged is very basic—their right to execute determined enemies of their whole greedy, unjust, corrupt, racist system. Evidence, fairness, popular opinion—none of it must stand in the way of the exercise of that right. The lesson they intend to teach us is that resistance is futile.



that we face no easy struggle. They are stronger than us—they have state power. It will take a massive campaign with imaginative tactics to save Mumia.

An additional complication, which makes the battle even tougher, is the fact that Mumia is charged with killing a cop. It is a basic point of Marxist theory that the police are tools of the ruling class, whose job is to serve and protect their social system and their property. To a certain extent, though, the police also have their own independent interests, interests like higher paychecks, earlier retirement, freedom from civilian review boards—and severe punishment for anyone who harms a cop. As the movement for Mumia grew, right-wing figures turned to the police, not just in Philly but nationwide, to act as shock troops in their campaign to make sure the execution goes through.

Mumia is, for the cops, a symbol of what the police, especially white cops who make up an occupying army in the ghettos of this country, most fear—a strong African American who does not fear them. One who dares to call them out. The Fraternal Order of Police and other cop organizations have thrown their serious resources—money, lobbyists and media respectability—into the drive to kill Mumia. They have also prepared and publicized a hit-list of Mumia supporters to intimidate potential sympathizers, especially politicians and public figures.

Finally, the battle to save Mumia is taking place in a difficult overall political climate, one which is more conservative than it was in previous decades. This is particularly striking around the question of the death penalty, a favorite cause of the right wing movement. During his 1992 campaign, Bill Clinton made a point of flying home to Arkansas to execute Ricky Ray Rector, a severely brain-damaged young man convicted of murder, just to show that he was tough enough to be president. (The leading Republican candidate this time won't have to make any such special effort—as Governor of Texas, George W. Bush has already presided over more than one hundred executions.)

## **It can be done**

Mumia can be saved from execution. Political struggle and hard fought legal battles have freed imprisoned revolutionaries like Black Panthers Dhoruba Bin Wahad and Geronimo ji Jaga and the FALN fighters for Puerto Rican independence after decades

behind bars. Political struggle and hard fought legal battles have freed dozens from Death Row in recent years.

But we are up against a powerful, determined enemy. Not every capitalist is intent on executing Mumia. Nor is every high government official. But those who do want him dead are the ones in the driver's seat now. The others won't even object, let alone act, unless they are forced to do so by mass pressure from below, from the people.

Those who want to execute Mumia Abu-Jamal have the murderous apparatus of the state, they have the power of their media to mold public opinion, they have the spirit of the era—look out for number one, any one who isn't rich or is in trouble has only him or herself to blame. To beat them we will need good strategy, good tactics, good slogans, a good sense of the battlefield.

## **Recent gains**

On April 24 joint demonstrations drew 15,000 in Philadelphia and a similar number in San Francisco. Militant marches and solid rallies underlined that this was the largest turnout so far for Mumia by far.

Coinciding with the rally, the members of the International Longshore and Warehousemen's Union on the West Coast held a one-day general strike demanding a new trial for Mumia. The mighty cranes and conveyors in the busiest ports in the United States stood stock still for a whole day. This was the first time in its sixty-plus years of history the union had shut the whole Pacific Coast down for a political issue.

On July 3 nearly 100 people were arrested in a civil disobedience action which closed the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia for hours at peak tourist time—one day before Independence Day. More demonstrators were busted in a support demo in San Francisco.

These events marked a qualitative step forward in the struggle to save Mumia. The arrests on July 3 were planned to serve notice on the rulers of this country that they will face determined and very costly opposition if they continue their drive to railroad Mumia to his death.

The general strike, though by a relatively small union with a proud history far to the left of the mainstream of the US trade union movement, marked a major step forward in bringing the working class

movement and the struggle to save Mumia together.

The April 24 demonstrations marked an even more important advance. In Philadelphia, half of the 15,000 who turned out were African American. Through much of the '90s, the campaign around Mumia, while led by MOVE, was built in significant part by predominantly white left organizations like Refuse and Resist and anarchist circles like the Anarchist Black Cross. Their work for years has been dogged and invaluable in bringing the movement to the present stage.

Still, their very visible whiteness has made it difficult for the movement to be seen as an integral part of the Black struggle. This problem has been exacerbated by the frequently ultra-left, ultra-revolutionary rhetoric some of them (and some of Mumia's supporters in the African American community as well) have employed.

Now a range of revolutionary, progressive and nationalist forces in the Black community are stepping forward to deal with this problem. For instance, in many cities, the Black Radical Congress (founded in 1998) played an important part in the April 24 activities, both in uniting with other forces in the Black struggle and in reaching out to the community and building the turnout. Since then Justice for Mumia has continued to be a priority for the BRC.

## **African Americans: The key link**

The Black community is the key to stopping the execution of Mumia. The self-identified left already knows about Mumia and a significant section has been mobilized, although more certainly remains to be done on this front. Even so, the threat the left poses to bourgeois legitimacy and stability has not caused the ruling class to back down. A stronger force is needed.

To be sure, activists among every section of the people have their work cut out for them. Within that, though, it is important to be clear—the biggest potential pool of support for a new trial for Mumia is the African American nation.

The oppression Mumia faces, caught in the bondage of the criminal justice system, strikes a familiar note in the Black community. Who does not have a father, a brother, a son or daughter, a loved one trapped somewhere in the giant machinery of repression—awaiting trial, behind bars, on probation, denied the right to vote because of an old conviction? Who cannot see the precedents, stretching back to slavery days, for the state's desperate attempts to silence and censor his courageous voice. Who doesn't hold in respect the memory of the Black Panther Party which Mumia had joined as a Philadelphia teenager?

It is the fact that the Black community is subject to different aspects of the same racist rule that Mumia

is fighting that makes it a volatile factor which the ruling class fears to stir up. After the police murder of unarmed African immigrant Amadou Diallo, a steady drumbeat of growing protest, reflecting a deep anger in the community, forced New York City to indict the cops who gunned him down in cold blood.

Efforts are underway to mobilize this potential base of support for justice for Mumia. A fine example is the Sacramento, CA local organizing committee of the Black Radical Congress. They have contacted churches in the Black neighborhoods, from old established congregations to little storefront churches, and asked to deliver a short statement on Mumia's case during Sunday services. Minister after minister has said, "Yes." BRC members have spoken



and then heard the preacher craft a sermon around the text of Mumia's case or call for a collection to advance his defense, to the amens of the worshipers.

More such work is needed in every city in the country. There are still millions who don't know who Mumia Abu-Jamal is. Organizers in workplaces, schools and neighborhoods meet a range of responses all the way from "Who?" to "He's the cop killer, isn't he?" or "He's the guy with the dreads, right?" to "I'm down with Mumia. What should I do?"

Members of the Black Radical Congress in Philadelphia—ground zero, where the issue is most polarized—have joined with other forces in the Black community to form a coalition called African Americans United to Free Mumia. They see their task as two-fold, one activist reports: "We feel our task in Philly is to put pressure on the Black elites to break ranks with the white bourgeoisie around this issue. To do this, we feel the need to build more "mainstream" support in the Black community—speaking at churches, utilizing the local Black press and radio shows. We are also going to jack up the Black State Legislative Caucus around Mumia's case and

## Lessons of the Puerto Rican prisoners

The recent decision by the Clinton Administration to release the Puerto Rican political prisoners associated with the Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Nacional shows clearly how important it is to take the campaign for justice for Mumia deeper into the Black community. These men and women had been jailed on charges of planning and undertaking military actions like armored car robberies and bombings. They had been vilified as terrorists by the media and politicians.

We do not know what particular political calculations went into the decision to grant them clemency a few months ago. Behind that decision, though, lies one undeniable political fact. Politically aware Puerto Ricans from all points on the political spectrum—independentistas, sure, but also advocates of statehood for PR and supporters of the Commonwealth status quo—all supported clemency.

To all of them the prisoners were patriots who had fought for Puerto Rico and didn't deserve to rot in jail for decades more.

The lesson is obvious. If African Americans as a people increasingly come to understand that Mumia Abu-Jamal is ours and that his fate has deep meaning for our community, it will be clear to the ruling class that the stakes in his case have been raised and the potential costs of executing him have multiplied.

what exactly they have the power to do. We are looking to pressure prominent Black institutions and individuals to take a stand on his case."

Meanwhile, "the basic and consistent work that needs to go on is flyer-ing and leafleting in the Black neighborhoods and the education of young people about his case."

## **Drawing on other social movements**

The struggle to save Mumia intersects with some of the most powerful and important people's movements of the 1990s. The campaign to save Mumia Abu-Jamal needs to draw on these movements for support and to lend its own strength to them in turn. This will bring hundreds, thousands of new activists into motion around Justice for Mumia.

- The powerful and growing movement to end the death penalty is the one where some links have already been developed to the effort to free Mumia. This movement has drawn heavily on religious activists and been boosted by a range of cultural forms like movies exposing the racism, brutality and arbitrariness of the death penalty. Though anti-death penalty activists are natural allies, mobilizing them will require active outreach. There are those in this movement who shy away from the controversy surrounding Mumia's case and from his bold revolutionary stand. Justice for Mumia events are well served by including representatives of this movement.
- Other movements which have already come forward around Mumia are the more conscious and militant sections of the movements of other oppressed nationalities in the US. Among them are the Puerto Rican and First Nations movements which have their own political prisoners and prisoners of war held by the US government.
- The Critical Resistance Conference, held in 1998 in Berkeley, CA, marked the maturation of a new movement targeting the Prison-Industrial Complex. With a large force of young activists from colleges, high schools and the streets, this movement has provided a new center within the long-standing prison reform movement, a new, broad analysis of the role of prisons in modern US society, and a new militancy to the struggle. Their critique of the prison system is a potent weapon for organizing in communities of color.

- The movement against police brutality, racism and murder has been a real beacon in the last few years. It is made up of scores of local movements triggered by one outrage or another. Some, like the station-house torture of Haitian immigrant Abner Louima, get national attention. Many more, like the recent police murders of LaTanya Haggerty and Bobby Russ in Chicago, spark waves of local demonstrations and raise the temperature in the community. To link these struggles with the case of Mumia, it is not enough to show up at demos and hand out leaflets on Mumia. Activists have to take up these battles and in the course of building them bring out their relationship to the issue of Justice for Mumia.
- Finally, there is the labor movement. This is a difficult arena to work in, but the experience of the West Coast longshoremens and locals like Mailhandlers Local 300 shows that some unions will mobilize actively to fight for a new trial for Mumia. Even where this seems unlikely, there are steps to be taken. Labor activists can try to pass resolutions in their locals and then struggle to have the union take steps to make the paper resolutions real. Investigate whether a resolution might have passed at a regional or national convention and use that to raise the issue in your local. Even without local union support, rank and filers can organize activities on the shop floor like Mumia T-shirt days. And folks involved in the Labor Party can make use of that organization's stance for a new trial for Mumia to have an organized local voice within the labor movement.

## **The state of the movement**

One thing it is important to understand is that there is no single left group which is able to provide a central organizing framework for the struggle to save Mumia. The political core of the campaign from the start has been the MOVE organization, which has guided the struggle through the International Concerned Family and Friends of Mumia Abu-Jamal. It has been MOVE'S line and persistent struggle in the face of hardship and very real threats that have gotten the campaign this far and will continue to provide leadership as the battle intensifies.

Neither MOVE nor the International Concerned Family and Friends, however, have the forces to provide a nationwide organizational framework which the rest of the movement can use to build its efforts

on. The Workers World Party has perhaps come the closest—with considerable effort, working through the International Action Center, they provided the organizing core of the twin April 24 demos. The Revolutionary Communist Party, working through Refuse & Resist, has played a crucial role in the mobilization of youth and especially of cultural workers, which is one of the most visible forms of outreach the movement has developed. Mumia 911, the September 11 day of cultural activism for Mumia, was an excellent example of such organizing.

Still, the main way the movement has been developed so far is through a combination of local initiatives and general calls. The September 19 through 25 Mumia Awareness Week was an example of this at a fairly high level. The national call went out to organize Mumia events and then it was up to folks in different locations, different social movements, different sections of the people to take it up. The results were uneven. On the one hand hundreds and hundreds of events took place—video showings concerts, vigils, teach-ins, door to door canvassing and so on. At the same time, the capstone events, marches on the last day, tended to be small, drawing few new folks and featuring a lot of ultra-revolutionary rhetoric,

(Those with experience in the organizations of the new communist movement in the 1970s know how much easier it is to build campaigns like this when there is an organized core, even a relatively small one, in many areas, working together, concentrating forces to make breakthroughs, summing up practice and propagating lessons. Alas, that is not where things are at now.)

Given that this is the state of things, people making general calls should do their best to combine them with particular and specific guidance, as Mao Zedong liked to point out. A good example of this was an initiative by teachers from the Oakland, CA and New York City school districts. Summing up successful activities last spring, they contacted each other and put out a call for teachers to take the issue of Mumia to their students during this school year. In doing so they provided summations of what worked and what didn't from their own experience, and also provided web sites with resources and curriculum guides for teachers to use. They also tried to take advantage of existing networks of progressive teachers, like the National Coalition of Education Activists to spread the word.

## The flavor of the movement

It is important that socialists and revolutionaries keep in mind the kind of movement we are building. The starting point is that our task is, first and foremost, to thwart the ruling class drive for the execution of Mumia Abu-Jamal and, beyond that, to win his freedom.

Yes, we want to educate the masses of people about how bad and racist this system is. Yes, we'd like to see a reinvigorated Black Liberation Movement and help lay the foundation for a new upsurge of struggle like the '60s. Yes, we want to demonstrate the need for socialist revolution. But we have to unfold these things around the main task, and to keep in mind what takes priority.

Placing the emphasis on saving Mumia means building the broadest possible front to stop his execution. This will mean overcoming the lefty, rhetorical flavor the movement has inherited from the forces who have done so much to carry on the struggle since the mid-1990s. Too many demos feature one extended speech after another on how only a nationwide general strike, or maybe the destruction of capitalism itself, can free Mumia. Speakers also regularly proclaim that the execution of Mumia will bring on a cataclysmic firestorm of retribution from the masses. Many young people open to radical ideas will find this to be right on, but it leaves too many other potential fighters cold.

The same point can be made around the culture presented. Many of today's sharpest hip-hop artists have stepped forward to perform at rallies and benefits. This is great, but not everybody is into rap. How about adding a gospel choir or a jazz combo with a vocalist? It won't be as easy to hook up, but it will make for a better demonstration.

One issue this raises is the questions of slogans. For the movement as a whole, a range of calls is needed. A good umbrella slogan is "Justice for Mumia." It has the potential to unite both the thousands of people who have been won to see that Mumia's trial was a brutal farce, even though they may not be convinced of his innocence, as well as the core of the movement, who stand on Mumia's innocence. It can also complement calls for "A New Trial For Mumia" and to "Stop the Execution of Mumia Abu-Jamal," which can help mobilize enemies of the death penalty.

Folks organizing in different sectors have to gauge

what slogan is the best to build their work. Activists in the Black Radical Congress in Philadelphia, for instance, have discussed this question. Summing up from their organizing, they use "Free Mumia" as well as "Justice for Mumia." The great majority of the folks they've done outreach to feel Mumia has done enough time even if he were guilty, and some bluntly question the idea that a Black man can get a fair trial in this country, period.

A final caution on flavor. We have to be very honest and straightforward in the kind of evaluation of the situation we take to the masses of people. If we sell too many wolf tickets about the imminence of Mumia's execution, we risk making folks cynical exactly as the clock does tick down. If we puff up the accomplishments of the movement too large and make claims like, "They'll never dare execute him now," we risk letting people think they don't have to intensify their efforts in the months to come.

## Tasks for the movement

In building popular consciousness about Mumia's case, one of the most powerful vehicles has been media controversy. When the Oakland teacher's union scheduled a day of in-school activities, when the platinum-selling rock band Rage Against The Machine sold out a New Jersey stadium for a benefit, when the graduating seniors at Evergreen State College picked Mumia to speak (via tape) at their commencement, right-wing politicians and media mouthpieces blew their stack. The resulting headlines and talk-radio furor drew more attention to the case. It is our task to take advantage of these openings to counter their negative propaganda and get our views and our demands out.

While we have limited ability to organize huge eruptions of controversy like this, every large public demonstration and small, well-conceived militant action can draw some media attention and intensify the public debate, at least on a local scale. This is true even though there is clearly an effort to impose a media whiteout on Mumia protests as was seen by the scanty coverage given to the widespread TDA (The Day After) demonstrations which took place as word spread that Mumia's execution date had been set.

This is another reason why the July 3 blockade of the Liberty Bell is a precedent which needs to be built on. Militant actions and civil disobedience serve several valuable functions. They attract media atten-

tion and help spread the word; they serve as a threat to the state that they cannot move against Mumia with impunity; and they train a cadre of activists who are ready to move when events demand it. Such actions serve as trial runs for further civil disobedience (and for uncivil disobedience) in response to major developments in Mumia's case as events unfold,

However, outreach is the main task now, outreach everywhere, but especially in the Black community—spreading the word on Mumia's case and the need to speak out and act to stop his execution. This task has many aspects, The foundation, though, has to be patient, nitty-gritty grassroots organizing, the kind of organizing that draws new people into becoming spreaders of the word themselves. Such organizing can encompass a wide variety of activities, like those that took place during September's Mumia Awareness Week.

It is crucial that we break out of the bind of only mobilizing the ranks of the already committed. This we have to do when emergency responses are called for, like when Governor Ridge signed the new death warrant in October and folks around the country hit the pavement in protest. But if the other organizing isn't done, then the next time a crisis breaks, we will see the same old faces there, and there won't be enough of them to save our brother.

The spirit we need is captured well in the most popular slogan of the struggle so far:

Brick by brick.  
Wall by wall,  
We're gonna free  
Mumia Abu-Jamal!

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FREEDOWHO!D

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