

International campaign wins stay of execution for US black activist

Dermot Sreenan

1995

Contents

The witnesses	3
The “shouted confession”	4
The gun	4
Worldwide protests	4

American black activist and journalist, Mumia Abu-Jamal, was sentenced to die at 10pm on August 17th. Protests which took place in over twenty countries forced the US authorities to grant a stay of execution, just 11 days before he was to be killed. He is still under sentence of death. His supporters are still seeking justice for him.

Mumia has been the recipient of police attention since his teenage years. At age 14 he was arrested for taking part in a protest against the racist pro-segregation Governor of Alabama, George Wallace. The next year he joined the Black Panther Party and was appointed its information officer in Philadelphia.

In the 1970s he turned to journalism. His work in this field saw him win awards and be elected President of the Philadelphia chapter of the Association of Black Journalists. His writings and radio programme constantly ran items about racist practices in the Mayor's office and brutality against black people by the police department. As a constant thorn in the side of the establishment, he became known as the "voice of the voiceless".

In the early hours of December 9th 1981 Mumia was moonlighting as a taxi driver when he saw his brother Billy being beaten by a policeman, Daniel Faulkner, on Locust Street, in downtown Philadelphia. Mumia approached and was shot in the stomach. He was found bleeding on the kerb, from where he was arrested and brought to Jefferson University Hospital. Faulkner was dead.

Evidence put forward which suggested Mumia was shot by Faulkner as he approached the scene, and that a third black male shot Faulkner and fled, was suppressed at the trial.

The witnesses

In the original trial in 1982 only one witness identified Jamal as the man with a gun in his hand. She was Cynthia White, whom other witnesses said was not present. One defence witness did, however, see her over half a block away at the time of the shooting. Ms White had three prostitution charges pending against her. Without explanation, these were dropped. And it was disclosed at the trial that Ms White had been given police protection and allowed to continue working as a prostitute.

The second witness said he did not see Officer Faulkner shoot Mumia at any time, and then gave a description of a man sounding nothing like Mumia. Furthermore this witness, Robert Chobert, told an arriving police captain that the shooter had run away. At the trial Chobert retracted his testimony, saying he had been mistaken and that Mumia was the shooter, although he said he never saw a gun or gun flashes. Chobert was, at that time, facing charges in an unrelated case but the jury was not informed of his motive to lie in hope of getting his sentence reduced.

The third prosecution witness, Mark Scanlan, could not identify Jamal. He later admitted that he had been drinking and was "confused" about what he saw.

One witness who was not called was William Singletary, who said the shooter had run away. Following this he was harassed by police officers and threatened at his place of business until he finally shut down and moved to another state. Singletary's story was kept from Jamal & his defence at the time of his trial.

The “shouted confession”

The prosecution claimed that Mumia confessed as he lay on the floor of the hospital emergency room. Yet the doctor who was present, Dr Regina Cudemo, heard no confession but did see an officer kick Mumia. The doctor who made the initial examination, Dr. Anthony Coletta, found Mumia to be barely conscious.

Two additional prosecution witnesses claimed – over eight weeks later – that Mumia was struggling violently and shouted out a confession. These were Officer Garry Bell, Faulkner’s partner and best friend; and a hospital security guard called Priscilla Durham who also knew Faulkner. The supposed confession was only reported after Internal Affairs detectives interviewed these two in relation to a complaint made by Mumia that he had been beaten up in the hospital.

However police officer Gary Wakshul had stayed with Mumia from the time of his arrest until doctors started their treatment of his wounds. He noted in his report that the prisoner made “no statements”. Despite a ‘no vacation’ notice on his personnel file he was sent away on vacation until after the trial. Jamal’s defence was refused an adjournment until his return.

The gun

Mumia was carrying a legally registered gun, many US taxi drivers do. No test was performed on Mumia’s hands to see if he had recently fired a gun, despite this being normal practice. Nor did they test Mumia’s gun. Of if they did they suppressed their findings.

A Mr Jackson, who stated he was not experienced and did not want to take the case, was appointed Mumia’s lawyer against both his own wishes and those of the accused. Jackson was later disbarred from legal practice because of incompetency in another case.

There were just three black people on the jury for the trial of a black man in a city that is 40% black. Whipping up racist hysteria, Mumia’s former membership of the Black Panther Party, and his current support for the MOVE grouping (a militant black grouping who call for a “green revolution”), was admitted as “evidence” to show he had planned to kill a cop for years and should be given a death sentence!

Of the 103 people under sentence of death in Philadelphia only 12 are white. The trial judge has sentenced 31 people to death, only two of whom were white. Furthermore, Judge Sabo has a lifelong association with the Philadelphia Fraternal Order of Police, who have been running a high profile campaign to have Mumia executed.

Although blacks make up just 9% of the population of Pennsylvania state they represent 56% of the population on death row. Mumia is being railroaded to a premature death, a state murder. The facts of this case give every justification for condemning it as a racist miscarriage of justice.

Worldwide protests

An international campaign for justice has been growing over the last couple of months. In Germany 4,000 people marched through Berlin. The campaign is also growing in South Africa, India, Italy, France, Spain, Britain and many other countries. In Ireland the Workers Solidarity Movement and Militant Labour initiated the ‘Justice for Abu-Jamal Campaign’. This group has

distributed thousands of leaflets about the case, collected petitions and organised protests. Activities have taken place in Belfast, Cork, Dublin and Galway.

Make no mistake. Mumia Abu-Jamal is on death row because of his politics. Abu-Jamal's biggest crime was to be born black and have the bravery to confront the oppression which he was exposed to in America. Our struggle is for freedom and justice. So is Abu-Jamal's, and that struggle continues.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Dermot Sreenan
International campaign wins stay of execution for US black activist
1995

Retrieved on 28th November 2021 from struggle.ws
Published in *Workers Solidarity* No. 46 – Autumn 1995.

theanarchistlibrary.org