

# Mumia Abu-Jamal

## Living in the shadow of the gallows

A major campaign has been launched in the United States to save former Black Panther Party activist Mumia Abu-Jamal from the gallows. **Tony Mpanza** of the US-based Partisan Defense Committee explains why it is important for South Africans to lend their support.

**M**umia Abu-Jamal has been on death row in the United States for 25 years, after being convicted of killing a police officer in Philadelphia. There is overwhelming evidence that he is innocent, including the sworn confession of another man, Arnold Beverly, that he shot the officer in question and the testimony of eye-witnesses which the courts have refused to hear. There are indications of jury tampering, the coercion of testimony by police and a prosecutorial cover-up.

A former Black Panther Party spokesperson, journalist and supporter of the radical black organisation MOVE, Abu-Jamal has been an eloquent spokesman for the oppressed. The campaign to free him has now reached a critical stage.

In December 2005, the US Third Circuit Court of Appeals in Pennsylvania put his case on a 'fast track' for decision. Late last year, he submitted final papers in his appeal. Oral argument will be heard on 17 May this year.

In August 1995, Abu-Jamal won a stay of execution after worldwide protests involving the labour movement. Union bodies such as Cosatu (Congress of South African Trade Unions) and its mining and engineering affiliates, Nactu (National Council of Trade Unions) and the South African Communist Party and Nelson Mandela joined the campaign.

We of the Partisan Defense Committee (PDC), a legal and social defence organisation associated with the Spartacist League in the US, oppose the death penalty on principle, as we do not believe the state has the right to determine who lives and dies. We also oppose the calls by some organisations for a fresh trial in the same courts which sent Abu-Jamal to death row. We believe every legal avenue should be pursued on Abu-Jamal's behalf, but have no faith in the courts.

Abu-Jamal's case is an object lesson in class and racially biased justice. His conviction was not the work of a single 'rogue' policeman, prosecutor or judge, but that of a



*Mumia Abu-Jama*

system. It turned into rallying point in the fight against the death penalty, racism and state repression in the US.

What will turn the tide in this case is a worldwide campaign of working people, anti-racist youth, death penalty abolitionists and others. The mobilisation of the labour movement is particularly important.

The PDC was launched in late 1974 in the tradition of International Red Aid, formed in 1922 in the Soviet Union to provide legal and other support for victimised working class activists. Its American affiliate,

International Labor Defense, mounted the campaign to save anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, executed in the US in 1927.

The PDC has spearheaded international support campaigns for Latin American leftists persecuted by military dictatorships and raised funds for



striking British miners in the mid-1980s. It has organised monthly stipends for left-wing prisoners of conscience, including the attorney Lynne Stuart, her translator Mohamed Yousry and paralegal Ahmed Abdel Sattar; activist Jaan Laaman of the New Left Ohio 7; Hugo Pinell, the last of the San Quentin Six still in prison; former Black Panther supporters Ed Poindexter and Wopashitwe Mondo Eyen we Langa; Mumia Abu-Jamal's son, Jamal Hart; Jamal Holiday, a young black man jailed for seven months after the Republican National Convention protests; and eight MOVE members imprisoned since the Philadelphia police siege of their home in 1978. We also mobilised financial support for the formerly jailed United Mine Workers official Jerry Dale Lowe and Leonard Peltier of the American Indian

Movement, in prison for nearly three decades.

In 2003 we filed as friends of the court on behalf of Jose Padilla, an American citizen detained in a naval facility in Charleston, South Carolina, since 8 May 2002. A statement by George Bush's administration claims he is a material witness in alleged terrorist activities involving Al Qaeda, but he has been charged with no crime.

Black people in South Africa have experienced the use of capital punishment as a tool to silence political opposition. Leading anti-apartheid leaders like Nelson Mandela were saved from the gallows by, among other interventions, international protest and pressure. Although the death penalty was subsequently abolished in South Africa, there is huge pressure for its reinstatement. Organised labour should be at the forefront of the fight to prevent this happening. It should also be remembered that African Americans were among the leading international allies of the South African resistance movement during the fight against apartheid, mainly because they saw the oppression of black South Africans as a mirror image of their own plight.

The PDC asks South Africans to support its campaign. Pass motions in your unions, campus, community and religious organisations demanding freedom for Mumia Abu-Jamal and the abolition of the death penalty in the US.

*For more information, call Spartacist South Africa: 088 130 1035.*

Dear Governor

**MUMIA ABU-JAMAL**

On humanitarian grounds I urge you to use your power as Governor of the State of Pennsylvania to commute the death sentence imposed upon Mumia Abu-Jamal. The Constitutional Court of South Africa has recently declared that the death penalty is inconsistent with the right to life, the right to dignity and the right to be protected from cruel and unusual punishment as enshrined in the Bill of Fundamental Rights in the South African Constitution, Act No 200 of 1993.

In accordance with these views I ask for your compassionate reconsideration of the sentence imposed on Mr Abu-Jamal.

  
Nelson Mandela  
**PRESIDENT OF SOUTH AFRICA**

The Honourable Thomas Ridge  
Governor, State of Pennsylvania  
Main Capitol Building  
Harrisburg  
PA, 17120  
Pennsylvania  
USA