

Ohio college students defend decision to hear US political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal

By Denise Enders and Helen Halyard
24 April 2000

Facing threats and pressure from the Philadelphia District Attorney's office and police organizations, students and faculty at Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio have defended their decision to hear a taped address from Mumia Abu-Jamal at commencement ceremonies on April 29. Earlier this year, the senior class voted at the small liberal arts college to have Abu-Jamal give the keynote address.

Mumia Abu-Jamal has spent 18 years on Pennsylvania's death row after being framed up for the 1981 murder of Philadelphia policeman Daniel Faulkner. Federal Judge William H. Yohn Jr. is currently considering a habeas corpus appeal filed by Mumia's attorneys to overturn his state conviction and grant him a new trial. A decision from the court is expected this spring.

Mumia's fight for a new trial and opposition to the death penalty have won widespread support in the US and throughout the world. A number of Antioch students who spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* expressed sentiments that Mumia's case is indicative of a criminal justice system that is rife with errors, frame-ups, murders, racial profiling, coercion and outright fabrications.

The small college, located just outside the industrial city of Dayton, Ohio, has received threatening phone calls, letters from the Philadelphia District Attorney's office and has been slandered in the local news media. Maureen Faulkner, Daniel Faulkner's widow, has vowed to organize a counter-demonstration outside the commencement ceremonies along with the Fraternal Order of Police (FOP), which has waged a nationwide lobby for Mumia's execution.

Philadelphia First District Attorney Arnold H. Gordon called the students "impressionable" and questioned the college's sense of decency in a letter

directed to college President Robert Devine. Philadelphia DA Lynne Abraham labeled the students' choice "repugnant" and said it should be condemned by all right-thinking Americans.

The college president defended the decision made by students and stated in a letter directed to the Pennsylvania authorities, "Like many students concerned with race and justice, a number of Antioch College students have been researching this case and its larger implications for several years. This case represents a critical debate across the nation. In fact, given the recent deaths of Amadou Diallo, Sgt. Cornel Young Jr., and Patrick Dorismond, many students across the country have been engaged in studying these issues and organizing around them. Many find, from looking at the record, the trial transcript and the various briefs filed in Abu Jamal's behalf, that the essential fairness of the case warrants critical discussion. Amnesty International, which is often very careful about such matters, has added their voice to calls for a new trial. I don't know enough to make a judgment but my point is that there are critical and substantive issues involved that merit critical inquiry on the part of our students."

President Levine went on to organize a 90-minute public forum prior to the commencement to which DA Lynne Abraham and Maureen Faulkner were invited to present their views. Both refused, with Abraham calling the event a "pretense to cover up shameful behavior."

Students at the college have reacted angrily to attempts by right-wing political forces and the FOP to browbeat them into canceling the speech. Commenting on the role of the media, Antioch student Lance Russell said, "Headlines usually send a message. They normally read 'Cop Killer to speak at Antioch.'

Whenever former President Richard Nixon spoke, the headlines never read ‘Convicted Perjurer to Speak.’”

Explaining his support for Abu-Jamal and opposition to the death penalty, student William Atkins said, “There is a lot of social inequality that exists in this country. That inequality is present in the criminal justice system. How can they just dole out death sentences? It is a known fact that mentally handicapped, innocent and psychologically impaired individuals who were in need of intervention, but unable to receive help, have been executed.”

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