

One thousand protest death penalty near Pennsylvania's death row

By Eula Holmes
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On Sunday, August 13, close to 1,000 opponents of the death penalty attended a rally near the gates of the state prison that houses Pennsylvania's death row inmates and death chamber. The prison is located in Waynesburg, 45 miles south of Pittsburgh.

Only a few hundred feet away from the rally are held men such Mumia Abu-Jamal, political prisoner and former outspoken journalist, and Russell Shoats, who has been in solitary confinement consistently since 1991. Based on the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections figures from November of 1999, Pennsylvania has the fourth largest number of inmates on death row: 225. This follows California with 541; Texas, 450; and Florida, 389. There are more than 3,600 condemned inmates in the nation's prisons.

The rally was organized by Brüderhof, a Christian pacific group, and the Western Pennsylvania Committee to Defend Mumia Abu-Jamal. The first speaker was Sister Helen Prejean, the author of the book upon which the movie *Dead Man Walking* was based. Rubin "Hurricane" Carter, who spent 20 years in prison as the victim of a frame-up, drew attention to the case of Mumia Abu-Jamal in his remarks.

Julia Wright, the daughter of Harlem Renaissance author Richard Wright, also addressed the rally. She has addressed countless meetings and rallies throughout Europe in defense of Mumia Abu-Jamal and his demand for a new trial. Bud Welch, whose 23-year-old daughter Julie Marie Welch was killed in the April 19, 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, also addressed the rally to condemn the death penalty.

The final speaker was Marlene Kanish, a Chicago attorney working on the Mumia case. She drew attention to two of the four most recent "friend of the court" briefs filed on behalf of Mumia Abu-Jamal. US District Judge William H. Yohn, Jr. ruled August 7 that

these four "friend-of-the-court" briefs on behalf of Mumia Abu-Jamal—including one from the British Parliament—were "unnecessary and unhelpful."

The judge, who is hearing Abu-Jamal's last attempt at a habeas corpus petition for a new trial, said Abu-Jamal's "highly qualified" lawyers and local prosecutors have already briefed him fully on all legal and factual issues. The judge markedly added, "There appears little need for additional assistance by outside organizations."

Again noting the widespread support for Mumia, Yohn wrote that he was "aware of the worldwide interest" in Mumia Abu-Jamal's fate, but more legal briefs would only "add to the record and complexity of this case without any particular benefit" to Abu-Jamal. One of the rejected briefs in favor of a new trial had been offered jointly by the Pennsylvania branch of the American Civil Liberties Union and the Philadelphia branch of the NAACP.

Another brief was submitted by six lawyers' groups, including the Center for Human Rights and Constitutional Law, the International Association of Democratic Lawyers, the National Conference of Black Lawyers, the National Lawyers Guild, Prisoners Self Help Legal Clinic and the Southern Poverty Law Center.

A third brief came from 22 members of the British Parliament, and a fourth was offered by the Chicana/Chicano Studies Foundation in California. At issue is the violation of Mumia Abu-Jamal's constitutional rights during his 1982 trial before Philadelphia Common Pleas Judge Albert F. Sabo and at a 1995 state post-conviction appeal hearing that Sabo also conducted.

Marlene Kanish went on to say, "The British brief deals with the fact that Mumia asks for one single,

fundamental, basic human right, the right to have a friend sitting by his side when he represents himself in the horrific dilemma that he was placed in and wrongly accused. He was denied that. In this brief, the barrister in Britain addresses that terrible wrong and shows how American law supports the proposition that the violation of that right demands the reversal of Mumia's conviction and his immediate release.

“The second brief deals with things that have never been dealt with in this way. One is the fact that Mumia never had a trial at all. Mumia never was represented in court. The lawyer that was appointed for him by the court, when the judge denied the right of John Africa to sit with him at the table, that lawyer connived with the prosecution and the judge against Mumia to make certain that he would never be able to successfully appeal. The evidence of what I am saying is in the trial transcripts.”

During the rally the Philadelphia mother of one of Pennsylvania's death row prisoners spoke to the *WSWS*: “I think the death penalty is the most horrible thing in the world. The Democrats and Republicans aren't doing anything for working people and they have both agreed to limit the federal appeals of death row inmates.

“Pennsylvania Governor Ridge is signing death warrants as soon as possible now to try to eliminate people's federal appeals. This is taking place while people are getting bad legal representation at the trial level. The Public Defenders, who I would say 99 percent of the people on death row in Pennsylvania had for their attorneys, are young, inexperienced and not trained for capital cases. They have no investigators and they cooperate with the prosecutors and rely on the information that the prosecutors give them, while the prosecutors are not turning over information in favor of accused people.

“There are other men who are in SCI Greene on death row in Pennsylvania besides Mumia who are innocent, like my son. There should be a banner for all 168 of the death row prisoners in this prison, and they all should be defended. I don't know if they are all innocent, but I know that none of them got a fair trial.”

While African Americans make up less than 10 percent of the Pennsylvania population, they account for as much as 62 percent of inmates on Pennsylvania's death row. Since his inauguration in 1995, Governor Tom Ridge has signed 197 death warrants. Of those,

121 are for African-Americans, 61 are white, and 15 are Hispanic.

The only three executions since the reinstatement of the death penalty in 1976 in Pennsylvania have been under the Ridge administration. Keith Zottlemoyer was executed July 6, 1995; Leon Moser was executed on August 16, 1995; and Gary Heidnik was executed July 6, 1999. Prior to 1995 the last execution took place in 1962. All executions are carried out by lethal injection.

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