

Black Panther film fuels calls for release of jailed political activists

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Film serves as ‘opportunity to remind people of the real heroes of the Black Panthers’, says former party leader

When he was released from prison in 2014, Sekou Odinga felt like he was falling from the sky into a foreign land. After 33 years behind bars, the former Black Panther party leader was released into a United States he didn’t recognize – with strange technology and grandchildren he had never hugged.

Though he celebrated with family and supporters, Odinga, 73, also remained mindful of the many other civil rights activists who weren’t so lucky: “You always feel like you don’t want to leave nobody behind.”

This weekend, his advocacy group is gathering outside movie theaters across New York City to educate crowds at sold-out screenings of Black Panther about the real-life Black Panthers who fought for black liberation in the 1960s and 1970s – some of whom have also been fighting for their own freedom from incarceration for decades.

The Marvel superhero film, which is already breaking records at the box office, takes place in a fictional African country and has been widely praised as a well-timed political commentary.

For some activists, however, Ryan Coogler’s film and mostly black cast is much more than a refreshing comic book story that breaks down stereotypes in an industry dominated by white film-makers.

The Afrofuturist film has sparked renewed calls from attorneys, families and civil rights leaders for the release of more than a dozen incarcerated former members of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (BPP), the radical group founded in 1966 in Oakland, California.

“Many are in the worst prisons and the worst conditions, and a lot of them are getting older and suffer from health problems,” said Odinga, who was convicted of attempted murder of police officers in the 1980s, a time when the US government was aggressively targeting black power movements with surveillance, violence, arrest and prosecution. “This is an opportunity to remind people of the real heroes of the Black Panthers and the conditions they live in today.”

The film, which begins in Oakland, was released months after it was revealed that the FBI’s terrorism unit had labeled some people “black identity extremists”, claiming that activists fighting police brutality posed a violent threat. The concept resembled the US government’s highly criticized domestic counterintelligence program known as Cointelpro, which was used to monitor and disrupt the Black Panthers and other leftist groups.

“We have to educate people that this has all happened before, and it will happen again if we’re not careful,” said Malkia Cyril, a California activist whose mother was a Black Panther. Kamau Sadiki, a former Black Panther whom Cyril considers an uncle, was convicted decades after the 1971 killing of an officer and is still in prison, where he has maintained his innocence.

“We need people to understand that these are not simply criminals who committed some heinous crime being punished,” said Cyril. “These are black activists who are largely being punished for their activism.”

Although the Black Panthers made news for criminal trials and clashes with police, the party’s foundational work centered on “survival programs” for black communities neglected by the government – including free breakfasts for children, health clinics and “liberation” schools.

“They all uplifted people,” said Ericka Huggins, a former Black Panther leader from Oakland.

She said she hoped the film spread that message. She recounted when the former Black Panther Eddie Conway was released in 2014 after he challenged his conviction in the shooting death of an officer, for which he spent 44 years in prison: “He arrived on the outside of these walls with nothing but passion and love.”



Mumia Abu-Jamal is an innocent political prisoner. He writes political commentaries from prison

Others deserve that opportunity, she said.

In the lead-up to the film, many have mentioned Mumia Abu-Jamal, a former Black Panther who had his death sentence commuted to life in prison and continues to fight for his release in a controversial police killing case. His lawyers have long argued his innocence, claimed he was denied a fair trial and more recently fought for proper medical treatment behind bars.

“Mumia is always focused on working toward the liberation of black people and all oppressed people,” said his lawyer Bret Grote. “He is quite optimistic and brimming with energy and life, and they’ve never been able to diminish that for a moment despite what they’ve put him through.”

Kietryn Zychal, a Nebraska writer and activist, said she would watch the Black Panther film closely so that she could later try to recount as much of it as possible to Ed Poindexter, another incarcerated former BPP member. He was sentenced to life for a bombing that killed an officer, convicted based on the questionable testimony of a teenager.

“His case needs some attention from people outside of Nebraska,” said Zychal.

Monifa Akinwale-Bande, an activist whose father was a Black Panther Party member, said incarcerated BPP members, like Herman Bell, are repeatedly denied parole in the face of pressure from police unions.

She said she hoped the presentation of powerful black characters in the film could inspire audiences in the same way that the BPP inspired her.

“Adults I looked up to had taken such a bold stance against racism in America,” she said. “It had a huge impact on me and what I thought was possible.”

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Who Is Mumia Abu-Jamal?

background information provided by the Labor Action Committee To Free Mumia Abu-Jamal

Mumia Abu-Jamal is a revolutionary journalist. A former member of the Black Panther Party and MOVE supporter, he fought racism and police brutality with outspoken radio reporting in Philadelphia in the 1970s. Known as the “voice of the voiceless,” he was an award-winning journalist. His work continues today--from behind bars--with books he has written, and recorded essays on imperialism, war, racism and more.

Because he acted and spoke out against police brutality and racism, Mumia was considered an enemy of the state. He was targeted by the FBI’s COINTELPRO disruption program from age 15, framed for a crime he did not commit, and sentenced to death. His death sentence was overturned, but he now he is serving life without the possibility of parole. He has been falsely imprisoned now for almost 36 years. Cops, courts and politicians conspired to put Mumia away, and they are still at it; but Mumia has never wavered from insisting on his innocence!

Mumia Abu-Jamal should have never spent one day in jail. Mumia’s case exposes the race and class bias of the entire capitalist judicial system. The state demands his slow death in prison as retaliation to his defiant resistance to state repression and racial oppression. But Mumia has not been silenced. We stand with Mumia. Mumia’s freedom is part of our own struggle for justice and human liberation.

Help Free Mumia Abu-Jamal!

Join us for an international Day of Action to Free Mumia Abu-Jamal!

Actions are being planned for March 24 & 25 2018.

For more information, go to: www.laboractionmumia.org or www.freemumia.com

Or call: Jack: 510.501.7080, or Tova: 510.600.5800, or Gerald: 510.417.1252