

Tribute to Howard Keylor by Eliot Lee Grossman, Attorney-at-Law, Academic Member of the Permanent Seminar for Chicano and Border Studies, National Institute of Anthropology and History, Mexico City.

I first met Howard Keylor in the San Francisco Bay Area around 1978, after I graduated from law school, was admitted to the California Bar, and started working with the Partisan Defense Committee, a class-struggle legal defense organization politically supported by the Spartacist League (SL) just as the Militant Caucus in Local 10, of which Howard was a founder, was politically supported by the SL. Howard was an inspiring role model for a young “revolutionary” radicalized by the anti-Vietnam War movement and Civil Rights movement of the 1960's. I deeply respected, and continue to respect, Howard as a truly proletarianized intellectual with many years of political experience in the trade-union movement as a principled oppositionist raising unapologetically the Trotskyist “Transitional Program” from the demand of 30 hours work for 40 hours pay, to ousting the class-collaborationist trade-union “misleaders,” to the call for a Workers Party to fight for a Workers Government.

When Howard and other prominent SL supporters split from the organization because of its political degeneration I had the honor of being part of an informal “Workers Defense Guard” they organized to physically defend their first public forum in the Bay Area as the newly-formed External Tendency or “E.T.” which later became the Internal Bolshevik Tendency or IBT. The defense guard was organized after a physical attack on ET members at a SL forum where former SL comrades of Howard tried to play basketball with Howard’s head as the ball and a cement bench as the basket. Despite this brazen attempt at physical intimidation Howard was not deterred from continuing in the political fight for the Trotskyist program.

In 1984 I had the privilege of attending a meeting of Howard and a few other comrades who were discussing whether, as a militant oppositionist on Local 10's Executive Board, he should make a motion at the next board meeting for Local 10 to boycott the next ship coming into port from apartheid South Africa. Howard was pessimistic about the chances of the motion passing as he previously had similar proposals rejected. But after talking the matter through Howard overcame his own pessimism and enthusiastically resolved to fight for the proposal at the next meeting and, almost miraculously, the conditions turned out to be ripe for the proposal this time around, due in large part to Howard’s paving the way by his previous proposals for such action, because the motion passed unanimously, was implemented by the Local, and not only made national and international news, but was later praised by Nelson Mandela himself as having reignited a wave of militant struggle by the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa itself.

In 2001 when attorneys Marlene Kamish from Chicago, Nick Brown from London, and J. Michael Farrell from Philadelphia, and I took over the legal representation of radical journalist and ex-Black Panther Mumia Abu-Jamal, who at that time was facing execution by lethal injection after being framed up for the murder of a police officer, Howard was one of the first Mumia supporters to understand and support our exposure of Mumia's former lawyers, Weinglass and Williams, for sabotaging his defense when large sectors of the Mumia support movement and the Left undermined our desperate efforts to get the courts to hear the evidence that the previous lawyers suppressed, including the confession of Arnold Beverly that he, not Mumia, shot and killed the officer, a sworn statement by Mumia's brother that corroborated Beverly's account, and evidence from private investigator, Mike Newman, that one of the only two witnesses who testified they supposedly saw Mumia shoot the officer, Robert Chobert, recanted his entire testimony and admitted he never even saw the shooting. When I asked Howard why he understood and supported our position from the beginning when many others refused to do so, he told me it was simple -- he had no illusions in lawyers and no faith in the bourgeois legal system.

But not only did Howard provide our legal team with political support, which was of major importance in our ultimately being successful in saving Mumia's life by convincing U.S. District Judge Yohn in Philadelphia to overturn his death sentence, Howard also gave us legal advice, bringing to our attention a striking parallel between Mumia's case and that of Sacco and Vanzetti, two Italian Anarchists who were framed up in the 1920's for a murder they did not commit. After Sacco and Vanzetti's conviction in a grossly unfair trial, the real killer confessed, but the courts ignored the confession and they were executed anyway. Although we were all aware of the Sacco and Vanzetti case, none of us were familiar with these details. Inspired by Howard's information, we promptly filed a formal legal memo before Judge Yohn in which we brought up this historical parallel between Mumia's case and that of Sacco and Vanzetti and urged him not to perpetrate the same injustice on Mumia. The publicity around that memo resulted in my being invited to speak at a symposium on the Sacco and Vanzetti case at Hofstra University where I said the following about the memo:

"We were inspired to file that legal memorandum by a retired longshoreman who played a significant role in motivating his union's political strike in support of Mumia which shut down West Coast ports for eight hours in 1999, and who brought to our attention the fact that, in the case of Sacco and Vanzetti, as in that of Mumia Abu-Jamal, one of the professional criminals responsible for the crime for which these innocent men were convicted and condemned to death had confessed

and exonerated them of any participation in the crime.”

Mumia, unfortunately, remains in prison condemned to a life sentence for a crime he did not commit. Howard Keylor, at age 93, is still actively campaigning to free Mumia as a founding member of the Labor Action Committee to Free Mumia Abu-Jamal.

In summary, I think that we can all truly say of Howard Keylor, like Lenin said of Trotsky after Trotsky joined the Bolshevik Party, that “there has not been a better Bolshevik.”