

Solidarity: Against Racism, for Workers' Power

Mumia Abu-Jamal and the Labor Movement



April 24, 1999: Longshore and warehouse workers in the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) prepare to lead a march for Mumia's freedom through the streets of San Francisco. All the ports on the West Coast were shut down tight for one shift that day to demand: "Stop the Execution!" and "Free Mumia Abu-Jamal!" Heading up the march of 20,000, the 300-strong longshore contingent chanted, "An injury to one is an injury to all! Free Mumia Abu-Jamal!"

Death-row journalist and activist Mumia Abu-Jamal is the world's best-known political prisoner. But more than that, he has been "the voice of the voiceless," waging a relentless struggle against racism and injustice, imperialism and war, and speaking out on a host of other social issues. This struggle, and these issues, go to the heart of the struggles and aims of working people all over the world. So, it should come as no surprise that he has both extended concrete solidarity to working people, and been the recipient of the same powerful solidarity from racially integrated organized workers around the world.

Despite a threat of state execution hanging over him for a crime he did not commit, Mumia Abu-Jamal has from the beginning fought to expose for others the hypocrisy of the powerful, and the futility of relying on the capitalist state. In the first of his now-famous commentaries from death row, written only a few months after the shooting for which he was being framed, and as he awaited his trial, he wrote, "Nowhere have I read an account of how I got shot, how a bullet happened to find its way near my spine, shattering a rib, splitting a kidney, and nearly destroying my diaphragm. And people wonder why I have no trust in a 'fair trial'!" Mumia goes on to affirm that justice will not be found through "the

Philadelphia Police Department, the District Attorney's office, the court system, or your friendly neighborhood lawyer..." (A *Christmas Cage*, February 1982).

The Formation of the Labor Action Committee To Free Mumia Abu-Jamal

The Labor Action Committee To Free Mumia Abu-Jamal (LAC) was organized in late 1998-early 1999 in the same spirit of distrust of the ruling class and its so-called "justice" system. Rather than relying on an illusory "new trial" to free Mumia, we proposed mobilizing the great strength of the organized working class,.

On these pages you will find several examples of concrete labor-solidarity actions, both by Mumia in support of workers' actions and striking unions, and in support of Mumia's freedom, conducted by unions and activists. Links to some of the more salient documents pertaining to these actions and struggles will be found below. These actions point the way to international labor defense--the only strategy with the power to truly uproot the kind of injustice meted out to Mumia Abu-Jamal and so many other victims of the racist capitalist system.

The *Neptune Jade*--a victory for international labor solidarity

In 1998, Mumia Abu-Jamal headed the list of endorsers of the *Neptune Jade* defendants, a group of community activists and unionists who were being sued by the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA--shipping conglomerates) for their part in a successful picket of the ship *Neptune Jade* in defense of locked-out British dockers. Three years earlier, dockworkers in Liverpool, England had begun a years-long struggle against a lockout by waterfront employers, which was part of a general assault on organized labor under the Conservative Thatcher government. The cargo ship *Neptune Jade*, which had been handled by union-busting Mersey Docks and Harbour Company in Britain, was unable to unload in the Port of Oakland as longshore workers in the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) honored the picket line. The *Neptune Jade* was subsequently boycotted by dockers in Vancouver Canada, and Yokohama and Kobe, Japan as well. Global shipping magnates shook at the specter of international labor solidarity that this action raised.

Faced down by a strong defense campaign, the PMA was soon forced to drop its suit against all defendants. The successful *Neptune Jade* action was a major inspiration for the formation of the Labor Action Committee To Free Mumia Abu-Jamal (LAC).



Mumia Abu-Jamal

Mumia Honors a Virtual Picket Line

Despite the importance of publicity in his defense campaign, Mumia Abu-Jamal honored a virtual picket line in 1998 by refusing to be interviewed by Sam Donaldson of ABC-TV for a "20/20" documentary on his case, during a lockout of technicians and camera operators in NABET-CWA. "I had to ask myself," said Mumia, "'Would I cross a picket line if I were living in quasi-freedom and walking to the studio?' The answer was an irrevocable, 'no.'" ("A View From Death Row," Mumia Abu-Jamal, interviewed by Jack Heyman of ILWU Local 10, in *The Dispatcher*, February 1999--see link below for the complete text.)

The LAC was organized to promote bold actions similar to the *Neptune Jade* boycott--and to Mumia's own honoring of picket lines--to free Mumia. We realized that the organized working class has the power to achieve victory, while reliance on the bosses' courts was sure path to defeat. Our founding statement to this effect was adopted in January, 1999 (see the "Who We Are" page).

Workers' Actions to Free Mumia: Oakland Calif, and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Some of our teacher supporters had already been working on organizing a teach-in on Mumia and the death penalty in the Oakland Schools. Having been decided upon by the Oakland Education Association (OEA) (the teachers' union) in November of 1998, this action was held in January in defiance of the Oakland schools administration, and

despite a news media frenzy, which together tried to squelch the action following the shooting of an Oakland police officer just before the teach-in was to take place. Having stood their ground against intimidation, the Oakland teachers for Mumia informed their students with a special curriculum on Mumia and the death penalty, garnered significant publicity for Mumia's case. The OEA action inspired other such teach-ins in schools around the country, starting one conducted by Los Angeles Teachers for Mumia, in the United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA). (The motion that carried unanimously in the OEA is reprinted here--see link below.)

In early 1999, inspired by the Oakland teachers' action, and by plans then being set in motion for the longshore port shutdown (see below), teachers in Rio de Janeiro Brazil began laying their own plans to conduct actions to free Mumia. The 27th Congress of the National Confederation of Education Workers, Brazil, in February called for "the immediate freeing of Mumia Abu-Jamal, the black journalist known as the 'voice of the voiceless' and condemned to death in the state of Pennsylvania (USA)." The delegates noted that the struggle for Mumia's defense "has become the international symbol of the struggle against the racist death penalty."

"...struggle against racism in all its forms around the world"

Then in March, the state-wide assembly of the Union of Education Workers of the State of Rio de Janeiro (SEPE/RJ) voted that "education workers of Rio de Janeiro state schools shall stop work on April 23rd for one our to carry out a meeting to demand freedom for Mumia Abu-Jamal." and "to relate Mumia Abu-Jamal's situation with the need for an ongoing struggle against racism in all its forms around the world." The two planned stop-work meetings--one for each of two shifts--went off without a hitch, and inspired several other actions by Brazilian workers in 1999. In a message to Jack Heyman of the LAC, Ossie Davis said of the teachers' union actions, "...the move from Brazil is most exciting."

Actions continued in November, as the CUT labor federation in Rio de Janeiro raised the call for freeing Mumia as one of the demands of a day-long work stoppage by unions throughout the state; a labor-centered demonstration in Rio on the "Day of Black Consciousness" made freedom for Jamal one of its central demands; and a one-day strike by bank workers in the state of Rio de Janeiro included the demand "*Liberdade para Mumia Abu-Jamal!*"



Students at Ernesto Faria School, Rio de Janeiro, join teachers' union stoppage for Mumia. (photo: Vanguarda Operaria)

In December 1999, the Rio teachers union (SEPE) followed up its April action with a strike for half a day, including freedom for Mumia as one of its central demands; and almost 9 years later, in May 2008, they did the same thing again, calling a strike in defense of public education and demanding freedom for Mumia Abu-Jamal. (The 2 teachers' union motions mentioned above are posted here, below. For more on Brazilian workers' actions to free Mumia, go to www.internationalist.org)

Longshore Workers Shut West Coast Ports to "Free Mumia!"

Following the successful Oakland teachers' teach-in for Mumia, a resolution was raised in International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) Local 10 (San Francisco/Oakland) to shut down all the ports on the West Coast to free Mumia on April 24, 1999. Introduced by long-time longshore union militant, and Local 10 executive board member Jack Heyman, this motion carried on an ILWU tradition to use the union's power to withdraw its labor to support vital international struggles such as: opposition to the coup in Chile that installed Pinochet in 1972; the struggle against

apartheid launched by gold miners in South Africa; and the more recent *Neptune Jade* boycott of a ship with scab cargo. But this was the first time that the West Coast longshore union had shut down all ports to defend a political prisoner.

The main intent of the motion was to have longshore workers in all ports on the West Coast down tools for an entire 8-hour shift, through the medium of coordinated union stop-work meetings. The motion also called upon the union to join and lead the march in San Francisco on that day, which was being organized by the Mobilization To Free Mumia. Although the main slogan of the march was to call for a “new trial” for Mumia, longshore workers would march under their own slogans of “Stop the Execution!” and “Free Mumia!” The resolution also called on longshore workers in Philadelphia, and International Transportworkers Federation (ITF) and dockers internationally to join in the world-wide actions to free Mumia. (For the complete text of the ILWU resolution for the port shutdown to free Mumia, see link below.)

“Why Labor Is Marching for Mumia Abu-Jamal”

Having passed Local 10, the motion was adopted at the union’s Longshore Caucus (Convention), in March 1999, and preparations began. Employers objected to the plan, but were eventually forced to back down after union leaders deflected the overwhelming vote for the shut-down. A rank and file Local 10 flyer titled, “10 Reasons To March for Mumia’s Freedom” was distributed, and Heyman managed to get an op-ed piece printed in the *SF Chronicle* the day before the march, titled, “Why Labor Is Marching for Mumia Abu-Jamal.” In it, he said,

Labor and minorities share a common history of being victimized by the criminal justice system in this country. Both have long been aware of police repression and the unequal use of the death penalty against minorities and the poor -- from the Haymarket martyrs, who rallied workers for the eight-hour day, to Harry Bridges, the longshore union leader targeted for deportation for being a "red," to the Black Panther Party, whose program of self-defense put it on the FBI's list.

For many outside the prison walls, Jamal has become an articulate spokesman from death row and a courageous symbol of the struggle against a repressive system. Organized labor has the power to defend victims of injustice. By following the example of West Coast longshore workers, labor can stay the hand of the executioner and win freedom for an innocent man.

- Jack Heyman, “Why Labor Is Marching for Mumia Abu-Jamal,”
-*SF Chronicle*, 23 April 1999. See link to the complete piece, below.

Longshore and warehouse workers from San Francisco/Oakland were joined by ILWU members from Sacramento, LA, Port Hueneme and Seattle, as well members of the fraternal Inland Boatmen’s Union (IBU), to make up a contingent some 300 strong on April 24th. Wearing traditional white caps, and carrying the union’s large “An Injury To One Is An Injury To All!” banner, the predominantly black longshore workers’ contingent chanted, “An injury to one is an injury to all! Free Mumia Abu-Jamal!” as they headed up some 20,000 marchers through the streets of San Francisco.

The march formed up in Dolores Park, and rallied at San Francisco’s Civic Center Plaza. Speakers at the rally included Art Pulaski of the California Federation of Labor, Walter Johnson, secretary-treasurer of the San Francisco Labor Council, ILWU President Brian McWilliams and Vice- President Jim Spinosa. Jack Heyman of Local 10, the initiator of the West Coast port-shutdown action, also spoke. (A slightly edited transcript of Jack’s remarks to the rally, and a copy of the rank-and-file flyer, “ILWU Leads the Way! 20,000 March for Mumia’s Freedom in SF,” are posted here--see links below.)

Mumia Thanks Workers for Their Support, as Solidarity Messages Pour In

The ILWU Coast shutdown, and the education workers’ actions of 23-24 April, sparked an outpouring of union resolutions and solidarity statements, beginning with a statement from Mumia himself, titled “A Salute to Labor’s Strength.” Mentioning the teach-ins, the Brazilian teachers’ action, the “unprecedented Coast-wide ILWU shutdown of ports,” and solidarity actions around the *Neptune Jade*, and said, “...we are witnessing something remarkable; the internationalization of support and struggle for fellow workers.” The statement also thanked the Labor Action Committee for our work in helping to bring about some of these actions. (See Mumia’s original hand-written message, through the link below.)

Resolutions of solidarity with Mumia's case for justice came in from unions all over the world, both during the planning for the 1999 workers actions, and afterwards in 1999 and 2000. Motions or solidarity messages came in from the local Bay Area labor councils; and from Bay Area locals of the Plumbers and Fitters, Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners, Painters, Hotel and Restaurant Employees, Office and Professional Employees, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU), and Newspaper and Periodical Drivers in the Teamsters, among others.

From around the country, support for Mumia was voiced by several locals of various unions, including the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), the Communication Workers of America (CWA), Steelworkers, Local 100 of the Transport Workers Union (TWU) of greater New York, and postal workers in the Mail Handlers, American Postal Workers Union (APWU), and National Association of Letter Carriers (NALC). Postal workers in New York City, in Mailhandlers Local 300, and the New York Metro Area Postal Union, passed resolutions and ran a campaign called "Morgan for Mumia," to promote education about Mumia's case among the rank and file.

National and International Support for Mumia Shows Militancy

National (or state-wide) support came in from the United Electrical Workers (UE), the California Federation of Teachers (CFT), and later in 2000 from the SEIU, the largest union in the country. And international support for Mumia's case arrived from the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), the South African Commercial Catering & Allied Workers Union, the Transport & General Workers Union (Britain), and the Australian Telecommunications Employees Association. Letters of support were sent in 1999 by executive boards or officials of the Stockholm, Sweden Dockworkers union, and the Finnish Transport Workers' Union.

While almost all of the motions and letters of solidarity from US unions focussed on calling for or demanding a new trial for Mumia, international messages often took a more militant stance. Typical was a letter sent to then-Pennsylvania Governor Tom Ridge, from the International Dockers Committee, which represented an International Dockers Conference held in Paris, France in October of 1996. The conference had "condemned the state of Pennsylvania's unjust imprisonment on death row of black militant Mumia Abu-Jamal." The letter concluded simply, "We demand his immediate freedom."

But perhaps most remarkable among the international union messages was a letter dated June 1, 1999, from the chairman of the Party of Labour of Turkey. The letter, also addressed to then-governor Ridge, reported on a "Resolution Declaration" which had been adopted at a recent international trade union conference, which ILWU Local 10 member Jack Heyman had attended. The letter concluded,

The Conference, [pointing] to the necessity of demonstrating solidarity with the intellectuals, artists and academics who are exposed to oppression because of their beliefs, conveys its feeling of solidarity to black North American journalist Mumia Abu-Jamal, under the threat of the death penalty in the USA. The Conference strongly condemns such a barbaric practice as the execution of political prisoners by the hand of the government, and demands the USA government to release Abu-Jamal, who is a victim of police-government conspiracy.

In connection to this article of the Resolution Declaration, we would like to demand the immediate release of Mumia Abu-Jamal as the most basic necessity of universal human rights.

- A. Levent TUZEL, chairman of the Party of Labour (EMEP) Turkey

Longshore militants from Charleston join us for a Labor Conference To Free Mumia

In May 2000, a little more than a year after the historic labor actions of April 1999, a conference of labor representatives was held in Oakland to spread the word on labor actions to free Mumia. Co-sponsored by the Labor Action Committee To Free Mumia Abu-Jamal and the San Francisco Labor Council, the conference was attended by over 100 delegates, representing (officially and unofficially) 32 unions and labor councils. Among these were longshore militant Leonard Riley and two other representatives of the International Longshore Association (ILA) Local 1422, of Charleston, South Carolina. As Leonard Riley reported, these delegates arrived fresh from their struggles both to remove the confederate flag from the statehouse in South Carolina, and to (successfully) defend against a state union-busting riot-

police attack on a longshore picket line of black and white workers. As the report on the conference noted, “Local 1422 has concluded that the union’s struggle to survive, opposition to the confederate flag, and the continuing struggle of Mumia Abu-Jamal are ’all part of the same fight.’”

The conference was chaired by Karega Hart president of Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 1574, and co-chair of the Black Radical Congress in the Bay Area.; and Local 250 of the SEIU generously hosted the conference in their union hall,

Mumia Abu-Jamal’s greetings to the conference were read by Berkeley Federation of Teachers member Tyrrah Alafa Young:

I thank you, fellow workers for your impressive support shown this Friday, and your remarkable support demonstrated in the past. Truly it can be said that workers make the world go round, for the labor and toil of working people the world over feeds the global economy by actually producing the many and varied products that serve the public needs, public wants and public tastes. The power therefore that labor wields is truly immense, if somewhat latent. I’m therefore quite thrilled to have your support, to have you join us in this titanic struggle with the state to make your presence known on the side of life and liberty. For as we have learned in the recent battle in Seattle and the anti-IMF demonstrations, the rights of workers is also a core human right and an important part of a movement that is reshaping social and power relations. I thank you for being part of this movement. Ona Move! Long Live John Africa! From death row, this is Mumia Abu-Jamal.

The conference heard from longshoreman Larry Wright of ILWU Local 10, reporting on the historic port shutdown to free Mumia; from Bob Mandel a key leader of the Oakland Education Association (OEA) teach-in action on Mumia and the death penalty; and from Al Weinrub and Ralph Schoenman, of the National Writers Union, Local 3 (UAW). Workshops focussing on maritime trades, teachers, communications, postal, journalism, and service were held.

Among the 5 resolutions presented to the conference was one titled, “Resolution on State and National Labor Action for Justice for Mumia,” presented by the Labor Action Committee To Free Mumia Abu-Jamal, which called for a “nationwide day of action” for justice for Mumia, and “in the event that execution becomes imminent, we call on the AFL-CIO to organize open-ended strike action, to stop the execution and free Mumia Abu-Jamal.” After some discussion about whether to call for a “new trial” or for “free Mumia,” the resolution passed as presented. (See the link below for the complete text of the LAC resolution.)

A full report on the May 2000 Labor Conference for Mumia, titled, “Labor Conference Calls for Action: Justice for Mumia Abu-Jamal!” is available from the LAC in hard copy only. Two other pamphlets, containing copies of articles, union resolutions, letters and statements covering labor support and workers actions for Mumia in the mid-late 1990s, are also available in limited quantities in hard copy. To receive all three pamphlets, while supplies last, send your donation, minimum \$2, to LAC-labor pamphlets, PO Box 16222, Oakland CA 94610.

An On-Going Struggle for the Innocent Victims of the Racist Death Penalty

Despite a general shift to the right in union leaderships, including in the ILWU, rank and file militants have managed to keep significant portions of a class-struggle perspective alive. There is no better example of this than the May Day port shutdowns, conducted by the ILWU in collaboration with immigrant-rights groups and activists, against the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan on Thursday, May 1st of 2008. Once again, the union shut ports up and down the Coast, held a march and rally in San Francisco, and also supported groups around the Bay Area which held rallies for immigrant rights the same day.

Then in 2009, the ILWU sponsored a conference called “Racism, Repression and Rebellion: the Lessons of Labor Defense,” held at the ILWU hiring hall on Fishermen’s Wharf in San Francisco, and attended by over 300. This conference featured speakers from local unions, and advocates for innocent victims of the racist death machine such as Martina Correia, the sister of Troy Davis, an innocent man on death row in Georgia. This conference also heard from



Robert R Bryan, lead counsel for Mumia Abu-Jamal, and received an exciting last-minute call-in from death row from Mumia. (See the report, “Union Rally Calls for Struggle Against Racism and Repression,” on the home page.)

Later in 2009, the ILWU Caucus/Convention passed a remarkable resolution, sent to it from Local 10, on “Racist Oppression and the Death Penalty,” which came to the defense of Mumia Abu-Jamal. Troy Davis, Kevin Cooper (an innocent black man facing death in San Quentin); American Indian Movement (AIM) activist Leonard Peltier, also framed for a crime he didn’t commit; and the San Francisco 8, former Black Panthers who were victims of a flimsy attempted frame-up supported by California Attorney General and former governor Jerry Brown. (The frame-up charges have now been dropped against all of the SF 8.) (The text of this resolution is found in the “What You Can Do Now” page.)

Union resolutions are important, and the historic workers’ actions to free Mumia still stand as an example of the ind of power that can be mobilized to end the racist death penalty, and free its innocent victims such as Mumia Abu-Jamal. But what’s most important now is that you take action to further these struggles. We hope you find inspiration in these pages, and we’ll look for you in the streets!