

Friday, April 23, 1999 (SF Chronicle)

## Why Labor Is Marching for Mumia Abu-Jamal

Jack Heyman

TOMORROW there will be two national protests in defense of black journalist Mumia Abu-Jamal, who is imprisoned on Pennsylvania's death row. One protest will be in San Francisco and the other in Philadelphia.

Jamal was convicted in 1982 of the December 1981 killing of a Philadelphia policeman and sentenced to death by a judge who sent twice as many people to death row as any other sitting judge. Jamal's attorney, Leonard Weinglass, has petitioned the U.S. Supreme Court to review Jamal's case. However, if Pennsylvania Governor Thomas Ridge fulfills his vow, Jamal will be executed, probably within a year.

Support for Jamal is growing, especially within the labor movement and internationally. The International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) will lead tomorrow's march in San Francisco.

Marchers will carry the labor organization's banner: "An injury to one is an injury to all." Despite objections from maritime employers, longshore workers will hold stop-work union meetings at all ports up and down the West Coast to demand a halt to the execution and freedom for Jamal, and to discuss contract issues. Some 150,000 school teachers in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, will strike for two hours today to demand Jamal's release from prison.

So why has Jamal's defense campaign begun to muster significant support from organized labor? Jamal has gained the respect of many rank-and-file workers for honoring fundamental labor principles -- even from death row. Last year during ABC-TV's lockout of workers, Jamal refused to be interviewed by strikebreakers of the "20/20" program, asking to be interviewed after the dispute was settled. For him, he explained, it would have been the moral equivalent of crossing a picket line.

Again, in 1997, when the ILWU was under legal attack from West Coast maritime employers for an international labor solidarity action in support of locked-out dockworkers in Liverpool, England, Jamal endorsed the union's successful defense campaign.

But what's really inflaming the passions of working people is the recent spate of wanton killings of African Americans by police -- Amadou Diallo in New York and Tyisha Miller in California. Those killings, as well as the heinous, racist murder of James Byrd Jr. in Texas -- have resonated deeply among members in the heavily black unions of bus drivers, postal workers, hospital and longshore workers in cities across the country. Now the state of Pennsylvania is about to execute an outspoken black journalist who never received a fair trial and had no criminal record before his arrest.

Presently, there are 126 people sentenced by Philadelphia's courts on death row -- all but 14 people of color. In 1995, revelations of police brutality, corruption and the framing of innocent people resulted in 300 criminal convictions being thrown out and many innocent victims set free. A self-indicting training videotape by the Philadelphia district attorney's office acknowledges that blacks were routinely excluded from juries (11 in Jamal's case).

The United States last month was placed on Amnesty International's list of human rights violators because of police brutality, violations committed against people in detention and increased executions.

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 is an executive board member of the San Francisco longshore union.

-----