

Prisoner Updates

The Continuing Cost of COINTELPRO

Fifth Estate Collective

1990

Geronimo Ji Jaga Pratt has been incarcerated in California's maximum security prisons for almost 20 years. He was recently transferred to Tehachapi, in southern California, far from his growing base of support in the Bay Area.

On July 28, 1972 Pratt—a much-decorated Vietnam veteran and then head of the Los Angeles chapter of the Black Panther Party (BPP)—was sentenced to a seven-year-to-life term for the “Tennis Court Murder” of a white school teacher in Santa Monica in 1968. FBI infiltrator Melvin “Cotten” Smith, who was then head of Panther security in Los Angeles, has since come forward with details of the FBI/LA red squad plan to frame Geronimo. Now doing a life stretch of his own in Kentucky, Smith described a meeting in which agents and cops sat around trying to figure out which unsolved murder would be the best to pin on Pratt.

At the time of his conviction, Pratt had already spent nearly two years in maximum security lockup awaiting trial. Since being imprisoned, he has served more time in solitary confinement than any other prisoner of the U.S., a total of eight years. At Pratt's parole hearing in November 1987, L.A. Deputy District Attorney Diane Visanni made clear that he was being kept in prison, not because he is thought by the state to be a “murderer” but because he is “still a revolutionary man.”

Through it all Pratt has consistently maintained he was 350 miles north of Santa Monica on the day of the murder, attending a national leadership meeting of the BPP in Oakland. He also maintains the FBI has always been aware of his innocence, given that the Bureau electronically surveilled the meeting in question.

At trial, the FBI denied the existence of such taps and bugs. However, it was later forced to admit that it had indeed electronically monitored the meeting, but then claimed to have “lost” the logs which would have served to exonerate Pratt.

The Bureau also initially denied having infiltrated Pratt's defense team or having placed undercover operatives on the stand to testify against him; in fact the FBI was later forced to reveal that it had done both.

Finally, the FBI denied at trial that it had a “particular interest” in Pratt, but it was later established that he had been listed in the Bureau's “National Security Index” and his picture included in its “Black Extremist Photo Album” of individuals the FBI considered prime targets for what it termed “neutralization.”

In August 1989, the California Adult Authority once again denied parole to Pratt. The reasons given were less blatantly political than the revealing statements made two years earlier by Assistant D.A. Visanni. The parole board claimed Pratt had not undertaken “socializing” group activities which would assist him in “securing employment” if released, and because he is a “heroin addict.” This last part was later “revised” to indicate the board “believed” Pratt had “used heroin before entering prison,” nearly 20 years earlier. The board made no comment at all on the fact that Geronimo has several standing job offers the day he leaves prison.

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Source: *New Studies on the Left*.

Mumia Abu-Jamal is on death row in Pennsylvania, awaiting the electric chair at the state prison in Huntingdon. He is a former Black Panther Party member, an outspoken MOVE supporter, and a journalist called “the voice of the voiceless” for relentlessly championing the rights of the oppressed.

He has been a target of the Philadelphia police for 21 years. On December 8, 1981, in the City of Brotherly Love, a killer cop tried to murder Mumia in the streets. In an incident reminiscent of the 1967 Huey Newton shooting in Oakland, Mumia was seriously wounded in the stomach, made to sit bleeding on the curbside, and when finally taken to the hospital was handcuffed to his bed.

One of the assaulting cops was killed by a gun that was never found. Witnesses to the event did not describe Mumia as being the man who shot the cop. Instead, they described a short, heavy individual wearing his hair in an afro. Mumia is slender and over six feet tall and wears his hair in dreadlocks, as he had for several years prior to 1981. He was denied counsel of his own choice, and though Mumia requested it, the cop who arrested him was not allowed to testify.

The prosecution distorted his political philosophy in order to cast him as an intrinsically “violent black nationalist.”

At the 1982 sentencing hearing, the prosecutor argued that Mumia deserved the death sentence because of his political history which in itself proved that the defendant believed in cop killing. To try to convince the jury (11 of whom were white) that the execution would never actually be carried out, the prosecution claimed Mumia would get “appeal after appeal after appeal” in which to have his sentence reduced.

On March 6, 1989, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court denied Mumia’s last possible appeal to the state judicial process. On January 26, 1990, the same court denied his petition to re-argue the appeal. His fate now rests with the U.S. Supreme Court, where Chief Racist William Rehnquist has made it clear that he considers death row appeals to be a waste of time, despite the fact that two condemned men—Randall Dale Adams and Clarence Brandley—were able to establish their innocence shortly prior to their scheduled executions in 1988.

The signs are that unless something truly dramatic happens, Mumia Abu-Jamal will die for an act he was never proven to have committed. Unlike Huey Newton’s case, there has been very little protest or even commentary on his situation in “progressive” circles. The state has been able to pursue its efforts to lynch Mumia without even minimal public opposition.

Further information on Mumia’s case and those of other political prisoners held in the U.S. can be obtained by writing the Partisan Defense Committee, a front group for the Spartacist League. Although in this case the efforts of these trots are admirable, most anti-authoritarians would find working with them to be intolerable. However, what will we do to prevent Mumia’s execution?

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