

01-18-99 The Politics of Death (Penalty)

“Out of respect for slain Oakland police officer James Williams Jr., who will be buried today, schools Superintendent Carole Quan on Monday ordered principals to cancel assemblies and death penalty speakers planned for today as part of a ‘teach-in’ on [Mumia] Abu-Jamal. The event, sponsored by the Oakland Education Association teacher union, was organized before Williams was killed by a sniper Sunday.” -- San Francisco Chronicle, January 14, 1999

Back in October the teachers in Oakland decided to organize a series of lessons and assemblies with prominent speakers all addressing the death penalty in general and the case of Mumia Abu-Jamal in particular. Abu-Jamal, a onetime Black Panther who trained in Oakland, is a symbol for death-penalty opponents who believe the Philadelphia radio journalist was framed by police for being a police critic – or perhaps just because he is black.

The teach-in became controversial after an Oakland police officer was killed less than a week before the event. In a series of meetings the Oakland teachers voted to go ahead with the teach-in and the Superintendent ordered the teach-in closed down. Quan’s position is now that, “I will not allow people to use our children for political reasons.”

Teaching children about justice, the death penalty, and political prisoners is using them? Mumia Abu-Jamal has become something of a celebrity, partly because of his eloquent writings from death row, and partly because the facts of the case seem to so clearly call the fairness of his trial into question. People and organizations from all over the world have joined the movement to grant Abu-Jamal a new trial. Yet time and time again the judge who sentenced him to die – a man named Sabo who has condemned more people to death than any other judge in the country – refuses to allow the retrial.

All of which begs the question, why is this case seen by so many as political? Those siding with the Superintendent have said the teach-in is too political. Interestingly enough, the reason Amnesty International supports the retrial movement is that they too believe the case is political – that Abu-Jamal is a political prisoner sentenced unjustly to die.

One might have supposed that those who support killing this man would have thought it anything but political – an ordinary case of murder which has gone through the justice system and been resolved according to the standards of fairness with which the system operates. It is hard to believe that anyone could be so naive as to really think that way.

The Fraternal Order of Police in Philadelphia claim to think this way though. The FOP has been fighting the move to grant Abu-Jamal a retrial from the very beginning. The facts of the case are so compelling that a great many people believe they have the wrong man, yet the FOP seems not to care. This is odd isn’t it? One would think that the question of who killed one of their own would matter. But it seems not to. They have Abu-Jamal and that is enough for them. The fact that the real murderer is most likely free just doesn’t seem to bother them.

What happens inside the Philadelphia Fraternal Order of police or inside the police department itself is difficult to know. Perhaps they already killed, or have otherwise disposed of, the real

perpetrator of this crime and thus see no need to pursue justice. Whatever the story behind their position may be, they never liked Abu-Jamal and seem happy to have him killed and out of their hair. From their point of view there is nothing to be gained from a fair trial. A new trial would only make them and Judge Sabo look bad. A miscarriage of justice on this scale and related to an issue of such importance (the killing of a police officer) would have dramatic consequences if it were acknowledged.

The convergence of events in Oakland would seem to be the ideal time to talk about Abu-Jamal's case. How much more relevant can it be than at a time when Oakland is dealing with the issue of a police officer being killed? Is Williams dishonored somehow by talking about fair trials and justice? Isn't that supposed to be what he died protecting? Would it not honor this officer Williams' memory to discuss the question of justice in America?

No, that is absurd. Justice is a political question. And the Oakland police department is as embroiled in the politics of class struggle and repression as any other big city police department. This point was not lost in the discussions either; a number of students told reporters about recurring incidents of police misconduct that they have either experienced directly or witnessed first-hand.

According to a recent Chicago Tribune analysis (1/3/99), since a 1963 U.S. Supreme Court ruling designed to curb misconduct by prosecutors, at least 381 defendants nationally have had a homicide conviction thrown out because prosecutors concealed evidence suggesting innocence or presented false evidence. Of the 381 defendants, 67 had been sentenced to death, and 28 death row inmates were subsequently freed.

So it would seem to be a grave dis-service to the students in Oakland to not talk about these issues. They have to live in this country too, and ought to know just what they are getting themselves into by growing up American.

In the end the teach-in went on with just a handful of teachers participating. Though the greatest value in the effort probably came from the controversy itself. After all that fuss a lot of people are going to be asking just what the schools administration allows to be discussed if it doesn't allow discussions of people and events in the real world.