

Mumia Abu-Jamal and the Plight of Political Prisoners

Pam Africa Visits Detroit to Headline Public Meeting on Mumia Abu-Jamal and the Unjustly Convicted. MOVE leader joins Rev. Edward Pinkney of Benton Harbor in program hosted at the Cass Commons

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*An historic conference entitled “Freedom for the Unjustly Incarcerated” was held on April 20 in the Midtown District of Detroit when MOVE organizer **Pam Africa** and the **Rev. Edward Pinkney** of Benton Harbor spoke extensively on the plight of political prisoners and the criminal industrial complex in the United States.*

The event took place at the Cass Commons located in the First Unitarian Universalist Church which serves as a center for popular education and activism in the city.

Pam Africa arrived in Detroit from Philadelphia during the early morning hours of April 19 along with **Razakhan Wali** of Judicial Research, Inc., an organization which provides assistance to incarcerated people throughout the country. During the course of the day both veteran organizers met with local activists working on issues involving the status of juvenile lifers in Michigan, environmental justice, police brutality, housing foreclosures, gentrification and the overall struggle against institutional racism and economic exploitation.

Image on the right: Kimberly A. Woodson speaking at the Freedom for the Unjustly Incarcerated Conference in Detroit on April 20, 2019



These activists who met with Africa and Wali included: **Jeanetta Lewis** of the Detroit People’s Task Force; **Darryl Jordan** of the Cass Commons; **Kimberly A. Woodson** of Redeeming Kimberly; **Blair Anderson**, former Black Panther Party member in Illinois; **Derek Grigsby**, **Mike Shane** and **Debra Simmons**, all of the Moratorium NOW! Coalition, co-sponsors of the events over the weekend.

The visit by the two guests from Philadelphia came on the heels of a major legal decision which has paved the way for an appeal hearing on the initial conviction of former Black Panther Party leader in Philadelphia, **Mumia Abu-Jamal**. The revolutionary writer and activist has been incarcerated in Pennsylvania since December 1981. Abu-Jamal was wrongfully convicted in the death of a white police officer in Philadelphia and was sentenced to death. He spent over 25 years on death row and was eventually given life without the possibility of parole in the aftermath of a major international campaign in his defense.

Prosecutors in Philadelphia had attempted to block the decision to grant Abu-Jamal an appeal complicating the process which could have resulted in further unnecessary legal wrangling, stalling the potential release of Mumia, an award-winning journalist, radio commentator and supporter of the MOVE organization. Pam Africa has served as a principal organizer in the case since the 1980s, when the International Concerned Family and Friends of Mumia Abu-Jamal was formed.

Nonetheless, another global campaign was waged to demand that the prosecutors withdraw their motion to halt the appeal. This occurred the same week in which Africa and Wali arrived in Detroit adding to the momentum in the broader struggle to free Mumia and all political prisoners being held throughout the country.

The U.S. has the highest per capita imprisoned population in the world which is disproportionately African American and Latinx. Almost exclusively composed of the nationally oppressed, working class and the impoverished, the more than two million prison population has become a major source of profit and social containment of the most marginalized sectors of the country.

Conference Demands Freedom for Political Prisoners

Pam Africa began the program on April 20 giving a chronological history of the case of Mumia Abu-Jamal and the movement to save his life. There were two death warrants signed against Abu-Jamal in 1995 and 1999. It would take a militant campaign spanning numerous continents to have the executions stayed by the Philadelphia courts.

As a result of similar pressure and legal actions, Mumia was removed from death row finally in 2011. He was sentenced to life without parole which is unacceptable to his supporters. Abu-Jamal has never admitted guilt in the death of police officer **Daniel Faulkner**. The Fraternal Order of the Police (FOP) and other law-enforcement groups has sought to have him executed and detained in prison for life.

Africa noted that it was the power of the people which has kept Mumia alive. In recent years Abu-Jamal was diagnosed with Hepatitis C, a liver ailment which could be fatal. A cure for the disease is available with an over 90 percent rate of effectiveness. Prison officials had refused to treat Mumia necessitating his supporters to file legal actions which won him the right to medical care along with many other inmates in the Pennsylvania penal system.

Image below: Rev. Edward Pinkney speaking at the Freedom for the Unjustly Incarcerated Conference in Detroit on April 20, 2019



Other speakers included Rev. Edward Pinkney of Berrien County, located in the southwest region of the state of Michigan. Pinkney, a former political prisoner, was railroaded through the courts after being accused of changing five dates on recall petitions aimed at removing the mayor of Benton Harbor. Hundreds had signed the petitions due to the perception that the then mayor was compliant with the policies of Whirlpool Corporation based in the city.

Pinkney was sentenced to 2.5 to 10 years in the state prison system. After being incarcerated he was subjected to harassment by correction officers and officials. Nationwide support in his defense was able to lift the harassment and win his release after 30 months in detention.

Later on May 1, 2018, the Michigan Supreme Court in a unanimous decision acquitted Pinkney of all charges in the case, saying that there was no law in existence under which he was convicted in late 2014. At present Pinkney is assisting the people of Benton Harbor, an overwhelming African American municipality just emerging from emergency management.

The Need to Free Juvenile Lifers

A second panel during the conference was chaired by **Elena Herrada**, former member of the Detroit Board of Education and a radio host on 910 am in Detroit. Herrada interviewed Pam Africa just one week prior to her visit to the city.

Herrada has highlighted the injustices imposed upon those convicted of serious crimes in their juvenile years. Her weekly radio program often features prisoners and advocates for the wrongly convicted.

Several recently-released juvenile lifers addressed the conference as well. Kimberly A. Woodson spent 29 years in prison for a crime she did not commit. Since being released in 2017 she has married and given birth to a baby. Woodson is seeking resources to assist returning inmates who have spent many years behind bars.

Efren Paredes, Jr., another juvenile lifer still incarcerated for a conviction issued when he was a teenager, called into the conference from state prison. He is working tirelessly to bring about the enactment of a U.S. Supreme Court decision mandating the resentencing of those convicted of serious crimes as juveniles.

Since the release of **Jose Burgos**, another former juvenile lifer without parole, he has been recounting the circumstances under which he was imprisoned and spent over two decades in correctional institutions. He spoke to the audience about the years-long process of

gaining his freedom just several months ago.

Jeanetta Lewis of the Detroit People's Task Force (DPTF) read a moving essay about efforts to win the release of her son incarcerated in Michigan. Debra Simmons of Moratorium NOW! Coalition spoke on the problems with the Highland Park Police Department in hiring and promoting officers implicated in illegal and unethical practices.

Image on the right: Siwato-Salema Ra speaks at the Freedom for the Unjustly Incarcerated Conference in Detroit on April 20, 2019



Another former prisoner, who is out of bond pending appeal, **Siwato-Salema Ra**, convicted in 2017 on a weapons charge even though she held a permit to carry a concealed weapon, thanked members of the audience for the work done to win her release while she awaits another trial. Siwato gave birth while shackled in a state prison for women. Her case gained widespread support throughout the state.

Hush House Community Museum and Leadership Training Institute owners Charles and Sandra Simmons discussed the situation of their son in the state of California who is serving an extended sentence in prison. The son called into the conference and reported on the conditions prevailing in the correctional facilities in California.

Mandates from the Conference

Participants agreed to work harder for the release of all political prisoners and juvenile lifers. A demonstration outside the Highland Park police headquarters on May 2 was endorsed by the gathering.

Moreover, the general theme was to link the struggle of the people fighting against injustice on the outside with those on the inside. Prisons are merely another form of exploitation and oppression designed to enhance the authority and profit-making capacity of the ruling class and will inevitably have to be abolished in the course of the transformation process in the U.S.

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