



MUMIA ABU-JAMAL FACT SHEET NO. 20



Vicious New Attack by Prison

On March 5, 1998, the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections launched a new statewide attack on its death row prisoners. Guards swept through cells boxing up and hauling off the personal property of prisoners, and vicious new regulations were posted. Dozens of prisoners responded with a righteous hunger strike.

Stung by repeated prisoner law suits to correct prison conditions, and prevented by a federal court from singling out Mumia Abu-Jamal for special restrictions, the state has attacked the entire death-row population.

SCI Greene, where Mumia is held captive, is already a sterile landscape of endless white walls. But now death row prisoners are issued a single rough canvas jump suit with blue and white stripes, two sets of underwear, one writing pen, and some toilet articles. "No other personal property is permitted."

In addition, commissary privileges have been gutted and no food items may be obtained or kept in cells (an obvious hazard for diabetics and those on special diets). Exercise is now limited to one hour, five days per week, "weather permitting."

"An Attack on the Life of the Mind"

Under the new regulations, each prisoner is issued a two boxes approximately 12" x 12" x 16" in which he must keep ALL legal, personal and school papers! Anything that won't fit in those boxes must be shipped out at that prisoner's expense, or be destroyed by prison officials. A new newspaper can be obtained only by turning in the previous issue.

In practice this means an end to prisoners' ability to take courses, prepare legal briefs, keep informed of national and world events, and engage in much recreational reading. And that is precisely the purpose of the new regulations. As Mumia has written, they constitute "an attack on the life of the mind." Guards also confiscated antennas from radio and TV sets, which allows reception only to those prisoners who can afford cable.

In Mumia's case, guards removed 17 boxes of books and papers from his cell on March 5. This virtually ends his ability to complete his master's degree, to utilize the thousands of pages of transcripts and legal briefs in his case, or keep up with news about events in society which is critical to his ability to make key defense decisions.

Attacking the Right of Legal Defense

In an attempt to get around the obvious unconstitutionality of stopping prisoners' legal defense work, the prison has graciously offered to "store" prisoners' legal papers for them, if they get a letter from their lawyer saying that this is necessary. But they can only get these stored legal papers by trading them for other papers in their cell! And what are prisoners without a lawyer supposed to do?

In addition, this means that the prison authorities have the prisoners' private legal papers in their custody. Mumia's legal papers, including his confidential correspondence with his attorneys, have now been seized by the prison authorities for "storage." Given the history of SCI Greene illegally opening and copying Mumia's privileged legal correspondence, we can well imagine what is going on with his papers now.

An Attack on the Families

Also hit hard are the families of prisoners. Prisoners are restricted to a single, two-hour, non-contact visit, and a single 15-minute collect telephone call per week. Families of death row prisoners from the Philadelphia area find it very hard to come to western Pennsylvania. And when they can come, it means that they have to travel 300 miles each way for a short visit through a glass window. In addition, the prison has installed a fancy new "metal and drug detector," and visitors can now be turned away on the assertion by guards that "they didn't pass."

SOURCES: *Written directive by Superintendent Ben Varner and communications from prisoners at SCI Greene.*

Arm yourself with the truth. Get the full set of Mumia Fact Sheets from your local Free Mumia Coalition or from Refuse & Resist!