

ABSOLUTE CONTROL: A VISIT TO HUNTINGDON

The Pennsylvania State Correctional Institution at Huntingdon is an old, fortress-like installation out in the mountains about eighty miles northwest of Harrisburg. The maximum-security prison, which houses about 2000 inmates, is by far the largest employer in rural Huntingdon County -- and has been, probably, since it was built in 1888. The prison came to the attention of the Henry George Institute in 1989 when two students, Thomas Lyons and Mumia Abu-Jamal completed all three political economy courses. Soon more students started cropping up from Huntingdon -- a total of five graduates and five more enrollees, to date. Apparently Jamal and Lyons were getting word around.

The HGI's knowledge of Mumia Abu-Jamal's notoriety (see the May-June *Newsletter*) did not come from Jamal himself. It was not until he was halfway through the second course that we heard, in the press, about his death-row status, his solitary confinement, and the efforts being made on his behalf. To learn more, I attended a rally held in North Philadelphia in July of 1990, sponsored by the Partisan Defense Council, the New York organization that is coordinating a campaign to re-open Jamal's case. I learned there that Jamal was in "disciplinary confinement" in Huntingdon: twenty-two hours a day in a small cell, with no radio, TV, or phone; the remaining two hours for exercise in an enclosed pen known as the "cage." Why? He refuses to cut his hair.

It was decided in the summer of 1991 that the Henry George Institute would send a letter, joining the swell of voices asking Governor Casey to commute Jamal's death sentence and end the inhumane "D.C." treatment. Bob Clancy and I agreed that such a letter would have more force if it could report on an actual visit and conversation with the prisoner -- so, on July 12th, Philadelphia HGS Director Mike Curtis and I made the trip to Huntingdon.

We would see Jamal (and another death row student, Mr. Leslie Beasley) through glass and wire in an "attorney's room." While that was being arranged, though, we had a chance to meet with three HGI students from "population." Thomas Lyons, unfortunately, declined the visit. In a letter to Bob Clancy written later the same day, Lyons apologized, saying that he had been lifting weights, had had no notice of the visit, and indeed had not been visited by anyone at all, in six years. The other three, John Hoard, Leroy Robertson and James McCurdy, all spoke highly of Lyons as the Georgist who got them all interested in the first place!

These three men, all impressively purposeful and connected, gave us some insight into the ways of life at Huntingdon. "Huntingdon is a sort of elite prison," John Hoard observed, "for inmates and for guards. People are sent here if they are too violent -- or, too clever." The fact that our visit was unannounced to them -- although we had been told it would be -- was not surprising. The consensus was that Huntingdon maintains *absolute* control -- not through violence or overt intimidation, but through a Machiavellian management of information and communication. Some publications, particularly if they are left-leaning, are overtly censored; and regular mail intermittently disappears. The safest way, we were told, is to send it return receipt requested, but even that is no guarantee -- and at the base prison scale of 29¢ an hour, it gets expensive. Huntingdon inmates keenly feel their isolation. More than half are from Philadelphia. Amtrak, the only public transportation from Philly, stops once a day, ten miles from the prison, and there are no buses.

The initial appeal of the Institute's course was its low price; these

men wanted, they said, to study whatever subject they could get their hands on. As they got going, they began to find Henry George's ideas liberating. "It meant a lot to me to find out that there is a *cause* of poverty," said Leroy Robertson, "and there really is something that can be done about it." All three echoed that sentiment heartily, and insisted that many more inmates would be interested. When I mentioned that the Director of Education had stated that there weren't many inmates with sufficient reading skills, James McCurdy scoffed, "There are a lot of intelligent people in this place." Hoard, Robertson and McCurdy all volunteered to pass around HGI literature.

As valuable as our visit with these three was, I began to get more and more anxious. We'd been supposed to visit Jamal and Beasley first, then the others -- but no, the attorney's rooms were tied up.

Would some pretext keep us from seeing a politically sensitive prisoner? Mike, who has experience with prison administrators, having taught economics in Delaware prisons for twelve years, was less tense than I. But he agreed that anything could happen.

Finally, after a long wait, we were informed that Mumia Abu-Jamal had been brought to the cubicle, and in we went. What an odd, hollow sense of triumph, to meet, after two years of correspondence,

petitions, rallies. Jamal is a tall, imposing man, with a deep and resonant voice (the "Voice of the Voiceless," I immediately recalled: his show over NPR stations in the late seventies.) His smile, although not displayed often, is wide, open and bright. Mike and I talked with him for over two hours about many topics, and we marvelled at how well-informed he manages to be on all manner of political fronts.

Mumia Abu-Jamal exudes dignity and discipline. He would have to, to survive in his position -- certain aspects of which, however, are of his own making, or, more precisely, due to his responses to the conditions imposed on him. The dreadlocks, for example. A more conservative hairstyle could win him some creature comforts, but -- to trade one's dignity for a bit of the good life -- on death row? No: he maintains a neat, clean appearance; the red bandanna tied around the dreadlocks is impeccable.

Jamal files his own legal briefs. He has lawyers, but "They don't interfere. This is life and death for me; I have to do it myself." He gets periodic visits from his family and updates from advocates on his case, but the great majority of his time is spent in contemplation. "I would start on the Henry George lessons as soon as I got them -- and work right through to the last question in one sitting. Sometimes," he smiled, "I thought you'd forgotten the address."

Later, I asked what we could do to help. He thought for a while, and then looked up hopefully. "Got any more courses?" No, alas, we didn't, but we had students -- and so it would be arranged for Jamal to teach HGI courses by mail.

When they receive visitors, of course, death-row prisoners are conspicuously handcuffed. I am rather new to prisons, and throughout the second half of our conversation with Jamal a question nagged me: what about a handshake? It is not possible; perhaps one simply resigns oneself to that. But, as we stood to go, I found myself doing the natural thing (later I would do the same, almost as a matter of course, with Leslie Beasley) -- both cuffed hands press against the wire screen; both the visitor's hands press against the other side. That is a handshake on death row, and I'll never forget it.

-- *Lindy Davies*

It would be wrong to see Jamal's case as a total aberration, justice in this country being a highly selective instrument, especially in cases complicated by race and politics. But the extent of legal errors willfully overlooked here suggest that justice didn't even make an appearance in Judge Sabo's courtroom. The Governor of Pennsylvania, Robert Casey (Main Capital Building, Room 225, Harrisburg, PA 17120), can grant clemency to Jamal at any time now. He should do so immediately.

—Kathy Deacon, *The Nation*, April 23, 1990