



Abu-Jamal's son, Jamal Hart, Bobigny Mayor Catherine Peyge and Prof. Johanna Fernandez of Baruch College who wrote and produced the 2010 documentary, "Justice on Trial." (Photos by Linn Washington, Jr.)

Activists Attend Ceremony in France Naming Street for Mumia Abu-Jamal

by Linn Washington, Jr.

Bobigny, France – Native American activist Bill “Jimbo” Simmons was among the 100-plus people attending a Saturday ceremony naming a street honoring imprisoned African-American activist/journalist Mumia Abu-Jamal in this city located six miles from the center of Paris.

Simmons took time from his tasks while visiting France to attend the naming ceremony conducted by Bobigny city government officials as their statement protesting what they consider Abu-Jamal's unjust incarceration and praising his revered stature internationally as a writer opposing injustice everywhere.

"We are here to support Bobigny in recognizing political prisoners in the U.S. that include Abu-Jamal," Simmons said during an interview where he referenced imprisoned Native American activist Leonard Peltier who, Simmons reminded, "always supports Mumia."

Other activists working on issues similar to the Abu-Jamal case like police brutality and governmental assaults on dissidents also attended that Bobigny ceremony, the second time a Paris suburb named a street for this prisoner.

Ramata Dieng, who heads a national organization in France against police brutality, attended that Bobigny ceremony. Dieng said she wanted to show "solidarity" with Abu-Jamal plus meet-and-greet Abu-Jamal's son, Jamal Hart, who attended, representing his father.

Abu-Jamal won journalism awards for his coverage of police brutality in Philadelphia before his controversial Dec. 9, 1981, arrest for killing a policeman. He continues writing about police brutality from a prison cell where he doesn't have access to the Internet or word-processing equipment as he writes in longhand.

Dieng, during a program in Paris the evening before the Bobigny ceremony, said, "Most victims of police brutality in France are blacks and Arabs. The vast majority had no weapons and posed no real dangers to police. This crime continues and in almost all cases judges dismiss charges against the police."



Mumia Abu-Jamal

Luc Reinette from the Caribbean island of Guadeloupe participated in that Friday program on reparations with Dieng, and he attended the naming ceremony.

Unlike others attending that ceremony, Reinette shares many connections with Abu-Jamal although the two have never met.

Like former Black Panther Party member Abu-Jamal, Reinette was a member of a revolutionary organization – the Caribbean Revolutionary Alliance that waged a sporadic armed campaign for the independence of Guadeloupe and Martinique from France. And, like Abu-Jamal's, Reinette's activism produced a long prison sentence.

However, Reinette only served four years of a thirty-year sentence issued in 1985 before his amnesty release, while

Abu-Jamal spent 30 years on death row before he began serving a life-in-prison sentence in December 2012.

Abu-Jamal's 1982 death sentence arose largely from prosecutors exploiting his 17-month membership as a teenager in the BPP to convince jurors that he deserved a death penalty.

Abu-Jamal's controversial murder conviction has been upheld by state and federal courts, despite compelling evidence of both innocence and egregious abuses by authorities.



Jamal Hart talks with Mustapha Boutadjine, an artist who designed Mumia Abu-Jamal's poster. Boutadjine holds the poster in his hands

Condemnation of Abu-Jamal's conviction has come from the United Nations, the European Union and Amnesty International. While condemnation of Abu-Jamal's politically impacted conviction hasn't produced his release, it does undergird things like his receiving honorary citizen stature in a number of cities worldwide, including Bobigny and Paris.

Myriam Malsa, an environmental activist who attended that naming ceremony, lives in Sainte-Anne, Martinique. That city named Abu-Jamal an honorary citizen a dozen years ago.

Critics of Abu-Jamal maintain that he is a ruthless killer who receives undeserved recognition from persons motivated principally by their opposition to the death penalty.

Yet, many are drawn to Abu-Jamal due to his intellect and outspokenness reflected in the perceptive social-political commentaries he pens weekly and his six critically acclaimed books written while imprisoned.

The ceremony featured a pre-recorded message from Abu-Jamal, who spoke in French, a language he learned while in prison where he has obtained undergraduate and master's degrees.

Noted Paris playwright Alain Fox incorporated passages from Abu-Jamal's writings into his latest work, which he said received a "great reaction" when performed at France's largest theater festival this past summer. An excerpt of that play was performed at the ceremony.

Incredibly, prison deprivations like death row isolation (23-hour-cell-confinement-per-day) have neither broken the mind nor spirit of Abu-Jamal. He continues the legacy he enjoyed while working as a journalist before his arrest: the "Voice of the Voiceless" – ironically a mandate for all American journalists contained in the Ethics Code of the Society of Professional Journalists.

That Bobigny street-naming resulted from 10 years of concentrated efforts, including the construction of a new street.

The former mayor of Bobigny, the late Bernard Bersinger, had initiated a campaign for an honor to Abu-Jamal after a 1989 visit with him on Pennsylvania's death row.

Current Bobigny Mayor Catherine Peyge said the street naming is part of her city's fight for "respect and justice" for Abu-Jamal and others.

Bobigny is the most ethnically/racially diverse city in France where people representing over 120 different ethnicities live.

Rue Mumia Abu-Jamal intersects a major artery in Bobigny named after a famous French author/journalist.

Abu-Jamal's son, Jamal, spoke during the ceremony, predicting his father will "ultimately" be freed and come to Bobigny to walk on "this street of liberation."

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