



Bryant Arroyo with Suzanne Ross at SCI Frackville, 2/13/17

A Visit to a Jailhouse Environmentalist

On Monday, February 13, Joe Piette of International Action Center in Philadelphia and I, of International Concerned Family and Friends of Mumia Abu-Jamal in New York City, headed from our respective cities to meet in Frackville Prison (Frackville, PA, just a few miles away from Mahanoy where Mumia is housed), to visit the environmental activist prisoner, Bryant Arroyo. Joe arrived a little before I did. By the time I got there he had already been told he was not on the approved list, that there was no record of his scheduled visit, and that he could not visit Bryant. We asked the guards to check the list again, which they claimed to do, but they refused to show Joe any of the documentation they were supposedly reviewing.

They did allow me in, two hours later. They claimed the delay of my visit was due to Bryant not being in his cell. Bryant told me that he had never left his cell, and had noted to the guard that he was remaining there, even cancelling his law library visit, just to be sure not to miss us. A not very auspicious beginning, and one highly suggestive of targeted hassling of

particular visitors.

Both Joe and I wrote letters to the Superintendent of Frackville about the disturbing behavior of the prison authorities in dealing with our visit. Bryant, on his end, has filed a grievance on the disruption of his visitors' ability to see him and of his ability to receive them. This morning, I received an apology from the Superintendent for the delays.

When I finally got to see Bryant, I was struck by how calm he was, as I showed up without Joe and so many hours after we had said we would be there. Life in prison inures people to arbitrary delays, postponements, cancellations for so many reasons out of the prisoners' control, ones they often don't even get to have explained later. People "adjust".

I had spoken with Bryant many times on the telephone and we had corresponded some as well but this was the first time I was meeting him. I was struck by his polite, informal, and very respectful manner. Now in his mid-forties, he has been in prison for 23 years. He has fought to establish his innocence throughout those many years. It now looks as though his legal filing for wrongful conviction will finally be heard in court within the next year or two. He is very encouraged by that, and hardly refers to the length of time this struggle has taken as being outrageous.

Bryant grew up in Lancaster, PA, in a Puerto Rican family that owned different small businesses over the years. He was a 10th grade high school dropout when he became a father, but earned a GED. He later studied computers, drafting and, more recently, "the science of law". He was sentenced to Life in Prison Without Parole (a sentence that is being challenged across this country as unconstitutional). Because of the upcoming likelihood of court action, I am respecting Bryant's request not to discuss the details of his case which are, nonetheless, available on the internet.

Bryant says he has managed to keep his focus through his more than two decades in prison for a crime he vehemently denies committing by his determination to prove his innocence, get out of prison, and continue the work he has begun while incarcerated, but on a larger level when he gets out. He states proudly that he has never taken any psychotropic medicine, and has never spoken with a psychologist or psychiatrist (noting humorously other than with me, a practicing clinical psychologist). He says philosophically or out of his faith, that he has turned this nightmare that was forced on him into a blessing.

I contacted Bryant when we learned several months back, through Mumia, that the water at Mahanoy was dark and smelly, and that this situation was affecting other PA prisons as well, including Frackville. Bryant had brought a legal suit against a corporation that was going to build a coal-processing plant next to SCI Mahanoy where he was then housed, and won the legal battle. The plant was not built! When Mumia met Bryant after his own release from Death

Row in 2011, he was obviously impressed. See the text below of the message Mumia recorded about Bryant Arroyo in 2013. Bryant has filed several grievances about the water at Frackville, but without any improvement in the quality of the water available.

Bryant's Description of the Water Situation at SCI Frackville

As Bryant sees it, the water problem in the PA prisons is not unique to the prisons but is a community problem. It is, however, almost always a problem at the prison. It is very noticeable when brown or black but even when looking clear, it foams in a way that suggests an impurity and often smells of sulfur. There is something wrong with it chemically. The brothers at the prison constantly go to the infirmary for intestinal problems, frequent visits to the bathroom, especially if they drink say a pint or so of water in a single gulp. At Frackville, clean bottled water can only be purchased in the visiting room, not in the commissary. The guards' dining room has bottled water available all the time. The prisoners have no option but to drink the polluted water which makes them sick.

Bryant has written to both the Department of Environmental Protection and the Environmental Protection Agency but he doesn't believe their reports are truthful. First, the monitors who come to the prison do not test the water on the block but rather on somewhat cleaner water. Second, one government branch often covers up for another (didn't we see that in Flynt?).

The county in which Frackville, PA is situated, Schuylkill, has been called a cancer hotbed because it is so polluted and the cancer rate is so high. Bryant feels the government has both the funds and the resources to clean this up.

We will surely be hearing more from Bryant Arroyo as he has become a passionate and very skillful and fighter for justice, one who challenges the authorities whenever they violate the rights of prisoners, and who is determined to make people aware of these human rights violations.

Suzanne Ross, International Concerned Family and Friends of Mumia Abu-Jamal

What's a 'Jailhouse Environmentalist'? [col. writ. 2/17/13] © '13 Mumia Abu-Jamal

Most of us have heard of jailhouse lawyers –guys and gals who battle in court for themselves or others. But I'd wager few of us have ever heard of a 'jailhouse environmentalist'. Truth is I didn't think such a thing existed.

Well, it's real; and his name is Bryant Arroyo, a bilingual Puerto Rican who has spent a third of his life in prison, at SCI-Mahanoy in Southeastern Pennsylvania.

Arroyo didn't plan on such an endeavor, as he is, already, a jailhouse lawyer. But, like much in life, it was forced on him.

In 1998 former PA Governor Tom Ridge invited an area businessman to join him on a trek to South Africa. He, John W. Rich, Jr, was a power plant operator and a major landowner in the Mahanoy Susquehanna County area; a distressed, impoverished region where coal mines have closed down decades ago. Rich met and made deals with the South African SASOL Industry, and before long, he announced plans for a major coal to liquid gas project, literally right next door to the state prison in Mahanoy.

By every measure, this was a done deal, for Rich, his family and colleagues contributed to federal, state and local politicians (who supported his plan without dissent), and he was even bi-partisan in this effort, gaining the praise and support of Democratic Governor, Ed Rendell.

State permits were issued for the \$800 million plant, and state subsidies cut the costs by hundreds of millions of bucks.

But, Arroyo, a curious and inquisitive man, having read about the proposed plant in local papers, felt uneasy. "What if this isn't safe?" he wondered.

He visited the prison library, asked for the environmental impact statement (a study required by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), read it – read it again – and determined he would do everything in his power to stop it.

But what could one man – a prisoner at that – do?

He talked to everybody he could, gangbangers, guards – everybody.

Under prison rules, petitions are forbidden. So, he wrote a letter – and made hundreds of copies – to Mahanoy Township Supervisors – each mailed by one prisoner. Within weeks, the local Township Supervisors had received over 400 letters – and they appeared in a local paper looking disturbed

When a local reporter tried to belittle him by referencing his criminal conviction, Arroyo simply went back to work, and before long over 900 letters flooded the offices of the Township Supervisors.

His activities even attracted the attention and support of CELDEF –the Community Environmental Legal Defense and Educational Fund – which crafted an ordinance for the Township barring any non-renewable energy projects which threatened the area's health and safety.

Even prison guards, through their union local, opposed the project, with union secretary Timothy Teltow (a prison guard and resident of nearby Shenandoah), telling reporters, "I just can't see why this facility is being built right next to a state penitentiary.

Eventually, within a few years, the done deal was done. Over. Dead.

An \$800 million coal gasification plant, supported by powerful corporations (like Bechtel, and Texaco), and politicians (like the late Senator Arlen Specter, and ex-Senator Rick Santorum), had to submit.

It began when one man – a prisoner no less – Bryant Arroyo – became a 'jailhouse environmentalist' – and said no.