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# Introduction

Nellie Wong

 Talking back? More like no talking back. That's what I was told. In Oakland, California, where I was born and raised, my elders, my teachers, and others in authority drummed it into my compliant ears. Young as I was, through grade school and, yes, even high school, I rarely talked back. Being safe and secure, being what was expected of me as a Chinese female in America, obedience and silence became discomfiting siblings in what I deemed was normal.

It was better not to be scolded, not to rankle those who had power over me. Talking back was not for this born-in-the-U.S.A. girl. After all, I'd be set for life. This working woman would get married, have babies. This 8-to-5 secretary would be taken care of, not have to think, not have to make decisions; she could be irresponsible and oh so carefree.

But the voice, long dormant, constricted as it was in my parched throat, fought for freedom, no longer fearful of its sounds, scratchy, discordant, supposedly unfeminine, not reaching the melodies of Cantonese opera that I'd watched as a girl in dark theaters in San Francisco Chinatown. My world split open during the 1970s at San Francisco State University as I listened and read and began opening my mouth and talking back. And especially so when I began writing. In feminist studies, creative writing, English literature and Asian American Studies classes.

In searching for what I thought was only my personal liberation, I discovered a broader reality. I discovered that

voices of color, of black, brown, yellow and indigenous, all genders, gay and straight, in all their vibrant hues and tones, gathered together an outer world that was mine as well. The 1960s Third World strikes on college campuses for Native American, Black, Chicano/a, Asian/Pacific, and Women Studies had led the way. The Women Writers Union, which grew out of an intense and organized battle for more women and people-of-color faculty and curriculum, voiced a crying need for the heretofore silenced, ignored and shunted aside. I took the plunge. Now a secretary, now a student, talking back with the cacophony of voices feeding my hungry ears.

Fortunately for me, as I was finding voice I met sisters in Radical Women (RW) and members of the Freedom Socialist Party (FSP) whose analysis of race, sex and class liberation convinced me that organizing to make change was where I belonged. From a muddy, distorted vision as a private individual to a materialist vision as a public activist. From “I can’t do anything” humbug to “Yes, we can,” sparked the power of voice, at once aural and written, into action — socialist feminism, a vital force for radical social change. This was home.

Talking back was — and is — a potent force, a crucial step in understanding that race oppression, sex discrimination, abusive bosses, income inequality, poverty, homelessness, and never-ending war were systemic, institutionalized under capitalism to wreak havoc on our political, working and creative lives.

In *Talking Back: Voices of Color*, you will find a bounty of voices, an ensemble that brings truth to the floor, shepherded by the National Comrades of Color Caucus (NCCC) of the Freedom Socialist Party and Radical Women.

The NCCC, unique in the U.S. Left, comprises members of color of these two affiliated socialist feminist organizations.

We are Black, Latino/a, Asian/Pacific Islander, Indigenous, of mixed race, LGBTQ, straight, immigrant and U.S.-born, multi-aged, and of different abilities. Together we help each other find our individual and collective voices. We announce them from the muscles and guts of our bodies, from our all-seeing eyes and vibrant ears, understanding the shout-outs born out of rage and hope. We find mutual support as radicals of color working together across race and gender lines. We share histories, food, experiences. We argue, we debate, uniting together with a mighty body of voices for revolutionary change that spans history and the globe.

The Comrades of Color Caucus is a place to put our thoughts, to shape and hone them. An opportunity to become and be leaders. Talking back and out. Our voices singing out for sweet victories that engage and move us forward. Together. This, too, is home.

Most important, we provide FSP and RW with leadership, correction, analysis and proposals for action in the movements and on the issues of people of color. We bring our voices back to the parent organizations, where all are determined to confront racism, empower women and end our oppression as workers. Together, we lay the basis for dismantling U.S. capitalism and building a socialist feminist society where all will not just survive, but thrive.

Exploring ideas and long-hidden histories is also a form of finding voice. Through Revolutionary Integration, a theoretical framework of the FSP, I learned that finding the path to liberation comes from a deep understanding of a people’s history and social realities. Revolutionary Integration shows that justice for U.S. Blacks cannot be found through separatism but by a united struggle alongside this country’s richly hued working class. And further, African Americans and other people of color — maligned, brutalized and steered by

centuries of resistance – provide irreplaceable leadership for reaching a new day of freedom. So my liberation as an Asian American is bound up with that of Blacks whose battle against racial exploitation and indignity continues to this day.

As a feminist of Chinese American roots, my disrespect-ed skin color and low-paid status as a secretarial worker shocked me into a realization that I've embraced now for many years: the knowledge that racist, sexist, anti-queer, anti-trans, anti-worker discrimination leveled against one is leveled against all. We must seek integration into revolution-ary change, not into a business-as-usual capitalist America that puts people of color and women in chains. That's what's necessary.

Through this collection, readers are given a rare jewel: a gem ablaze with the colors of working-class voices, rather than abstractions from lofty academic towers. The offerings by FSP and RW members of color and activist allies speak out with deepest respect and understanding for the essential work in the multi-issued movements. The fight for quality public education, reproductive justice and freedom of expres-sion, and an end to police violence and war – this and much more is contained in this volume.

To whom do we talk back? To those who will silence us. Those who incarcerate us in prison or in the home. Those who deny us our rights to cross borders to seek refuge from violence and safety for our children. Those who brutalize us because of our race, gender or sexuality. Those who dictate rigid male-female identities rather than acknowledge the full human palette of gender. Those who attack unions and deny working women and men the right to organize, to strike. Those who destroy the environment, causing pollutants that make people sick. And much more. These voices of color matter. They need to be heard. Everywhere. That's why this

collection is important. It's born in and outside of the home, on the streets, at workplaces and battlefields.

As James Baldwin, celebrated Black gay author and activ-ist, has said:

You write in order to change the world.... If you alter, even by a millimeter, the way people look at reality, then you can change it.

That's our goal beginning with talking back.

*San Francisco, California*

# Dissent and retribution: Justice denied for political prisoners

Mark Cook



During my 24 years as a political prisoner, I was transferred more than 17 times to various federal and state penitentiaries. This gave me the opportunity to meet many of the 200 political prisoners who are still incarcerated. Their activism and commitment to changing the politics of the U.S. government have not been altered by their confinement.

I felt honored to share the company of those heroes — Veronza Bowers, Herman Bell, Matulu Shakur, Oscar Lopez, Larry Giddings, Bill Dunne, Adolpho Matos, Jaan Laaman, Leonard Peltier, Fawaz Younis, Jihad Abu-Mumit, Phil Africa, Sundiata Acoli, Anlo Chang, the Virgin Island Five, and so many more. I feel obligated to speak on their behalf whenever I can.

Political prisoners in the U.S. are people whose imprisonment results from actions or beliefs that challenge capitalist politics — the program of those who control our government through campaign funding supplied by the bosses. They are also those social prisoners who become politically active while in prison and get hugely extended sentences as punishment for joining the struggle for poor and working people.

One of the most representative and well-known political prisoners today is Mumia Abu-Jamal. His case raises two critical social and political issues: the political imprisonment of the Left in the United States, and capital punishment.

## A fallible legal system, easily manipulated

The death penalty and life behind bars are imposed predominantly on the poor under capitalism. Why? Because those who are impoverished are the most politically volatile faction of the working class. They are unemployed or underemployed and always in the vanguard of economic protests. So it serves the interests of the system to “criminalize” the poor and leftists in order to curb dissent against poverty and discredit organized leadership among the poor.

Canada, like many other nations, rejects capital punishment — not on the grounds that it is a tool of oppression, but because rational law requires an effective process to correct mistakes.

“Legal systems have to live with the possibility of error. The unique feature of capital punishment is that it puts beyond recall the possibility of correction.” With these stark words, the Supreme Court of Canada refused to extradite two young Canadians who would face the death penalty in the U.S.

But here in the U.S., Mumia spent 30 years on death row and is now serving a life sentence without possibility of parole. Because he is a revolutionary, he was falsely accused and convicted of killing Philadelphia police officer Daniel Faulkner. The case against Mumia is rife with error — error that conceals his innocence.

Another political prisoner, Leonard Peltier, a former member of the American Indian Movement (AIM), stands convicted of killing an FBI agent on a Lakota reservation. Like Mumia, Leonard seeks release based on evidence not presented at his original trial. Although he does not face the death penalty, his case once again demonstrates the legal system’s refusal to face up to its fallibility, because of the capitalist interest in keeping potential organizers of the poor

behind bars.

Then we can look at the case of the nine members of the MOVE Organization, a radical Black liberation group. They have been imprisoned for more than 20 years because Philadelphia cops killed a fellow officer and a civilian in a rampaging attack on MOVE's collective house. Why are the MOVE members and not the cops behind bars? Because MOVE articulates the degradation of the system and shows how we can enjoy social justice by exercising community political power.

There are hundreds of cases in the U.S. in which innocent prisoners/defendants have had their convictions reversed because of error or deliberate frame-up. This demonstrates that the legal system cannot be allowed to place these injustices beyond correction with capital punishment.

### **Prisons as political detention centers**

Mumia's trial was held during the early Reagan years of antiradical reaction. Twelve people on a jury found him guilty based on falsified evidence, evidence withheld, the lies of coerced witnesses, the rulings of an infamously pro-police judge, and the poor performance of a sellout public defender.

Even the rules of the current judicial system say that Mumia is innocent until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt. And reasonable doubt abounds. Untried evidence, for example, includes a confession by a man named Arnold Beverly, whose recently released affidavit says he was hired by corrupt Philadelphia cops to kill Faulkner, who apparently was a whistle-blower.

Today, tens of thousands of people around the world find Mumia not guilty, based on facts and evidence never revealed to the original 12 jurors. Can the state's 12 jurors have more power than the people's jury?

The trial jury was no more legitimate than a stacked

deck; the evidence they were allowed to consider was full of marked cards.

Mumia should never have been brought to trial and convicted — and given that he was, he should have been freed long ago. He should never have been threatened with death.

Mumia's situation puts the spotlight on political prisoners in the U.S., whose very existence the government denies. A powerful journalist, Mumia has attracted massive, widely based support to his cause. This has infuriated several political administrations since his bogus trial in 1982.

Because Mumia refuses to be silenced, he has been harassed unmercifully by authorities in the government and the criminal justice system. They persist in mounting obstacles to keep the truth from being told and to forestall the evidentiary hearing that would, if justice prevailed, free him.

These same official persecutors thwart justice in the cases of more than 200 other political prisoners in U.S. penitentiaries. These prisoners are regularly subjected to corrupt trials and massive sentences because they won't abandon their opposition to the status quo.

People who advocate for freedom for political prisoners do so for many differing reasons. This should not, however, dissuade them from moving in common to rein in the intimidation and terror this government imposes on its people through imprisonment. The varying interests of grassroots anti-war groups during the Vietnam conflict did not prevent those organizations from coming together and helping to stop an unjust war. The same show of solidarity is necessary to save Mumia and win freedom for all political prisoners.

U.S. political prisoners are people whose imprisonment results from actions or beliefs that challenge capitalist politics.

## **Society's obligation to right the wrongs**

During the 1950s, the McCarthyism that made anti-establishment politics “un-American” was open and overt. Today’s witch-hunting tactics against dissidents are more subtle and refined. But they are just as dangerous to the entire community in the U.S. today as in those bygone days.

Now we face our greatest social obligation: correcting the legal system. To do that, we must replace capitalism with a political system more responsive to the interests of the masses — socialism.

I see politics as the struggle for power over society and the economy. All the political prisoners I have met and talked with agree that the poor and working class must enter into struggle against the corporate bosses, who buy the congressional leaders and legislators who run the country.

Capitalism has no respect for human dignity or human life. It is a barbaric system, and capital punishment and political detention are its barbaric tools. To my sisters and brothers inside, I say stay strong. I salute your sacrifice.

# Make justice prevail: One Guatemalan woman's exile saga

Maya Gonzalez

 I am an undocumented worker. I was trained as an accountant, a high school teacher and a psychologist, but that is another lifetime now.

In 1995, I left my house and two children in Guatemala and came to the United States on a visitor's visa with my youngest child; my husband followed in a few days.

We had been radicalized in the '70s by the poverty of Guatemala and a series of U.S.-supported military dictatorships. While working as a teacher, my husband was kidnapped twice by the armed forces and tortured. In 1979, he joined ORPA (Revolutionary Organization of the People in Arms) and we worked side-by-side in Guatemala City in support of the guerrilla movement. When my children were older, I too joined the group.

ORPA was careful to limit comrades' knowledge of who was in the organization to one other person, so that if you were tortured you could only give up one name. Still when the government's counterinsurgency campaign began, the death squads killed us off slowly, one-by-one. Friends, neighbors and family evaporated into thin air. My brother disappeared in the '80s. By chance, a friend of my father's saw him in a military prison and because my father was a colonel he was able to save his life.

One month before my father died, someone tried to run down my daughter and me. We narrowly escaped and I knew

it was a message: without my father's protection, I and my children would be killed.

I arrived in the States in shock. Within three months, a second brother was assassinated at work. There was no investigation. He simply joined 200,000 other men, women and children killed in a U.S.-funded war against "communism."

We immigrant women were victims; now we are warriors, fighting for all the poor and oppressed.

I could have applied for asylum back then, but this required that I remain in the U.S. until I'd qualified. Sounds simple, but I was terrified that the children I left behind might need me in the meantime and I would be stuck here. So I did nothing when my visa ran out.

I started to look for any job I could find, mostly cleaning houses and nursing children and the sick and elderly. For two years, I worked for a newspaper. Sometimes I taught Spanish. I refused to use fake Social Security documents because I believed I had the right to work, an *inalienable human right*.

Fourteen years went by before I began to enjoy my life because the past held me in its grip. The war, the deaths, splitting up my family between two countries — it seemed all I had were memories and nightmares. I tried to block them out, but I couldn't. My mind was in Guatemala for I still dreaded what might happen to my children who as adults became human rights activists.

Simultaneously, anti-immigrant fever spread across the U.S., feeding my old anxieties. When my ex-husband and his new wife applied for citizenship, Immigration and Customs Enforcement told him they were going to investigate his marriage to me. This threat pushed me into a paranoid state.

Because of the history of my country, I dread being sent back as a criminal, with my hands and feet bound.

At times I wonder what will become of me, living between two countries. After a lifetime of work, I have no retirement income in either, and returning to Guatemala is impossible anyway. Femicide is rampant and economically and political-ly the country is sliding backward. In November 2011, former General Otto Pérez Molina, a past member of the murderous intelligence service, was elected president.

My story is not mine alone. There are millions of hard-working immigrant women in the U.S. who every day face the loneliness, discrimination, violence and exploitation of being women of color workers without the protection of the law. Forced from our own countries by circumstances beyond our control, we are hounded by the Obama administration's immigration police. But we are not blind.

We see that the poor people of this country are as bad off as we are and that everything is getting worse. Like other low-paid women, immigrant women are in the struggle and resisting, conscious that we must be part of bringing to birth a new day by creating unity among all workers, regardless of race or nationality.

Nowadays I sometimes go to the local Occupy encampment and listen to the speeches. It makes me happy because I feel it is the beginning of a big change, part of which must be holding the U.S. government and corporations accountable to the Guatemalan people for the decades-long injury they have done to us, our children and our children's children. We immigrant women were victims; but now we are warriors, fighting — not just for ourselves — but for all poor and oppressed people. We demand vindication!

# Toxic legacy: Native Americans protest deadly fallout from uranium mining

Christina López

 Ever since Manifest Destiny infested this green planet, Native Americans fought against the severe exploitation and horrific genocide that powered it. The struggle continues as Indian nations fight to ban uranium mining in their precious homelands.

Uranium mining mushroomed after the launching of the nuclear age. It provides the fuel for the reactors of nuclear power plants. Military demands for uranium, to build weapons of mass destruction, skyrocketed at the end of World War II.

The mining industry got their much sought-after uranium as rich deposits were discovered on Indian reservations in what was originally thought of as desolate, useless land. The mining industry made huge profits off thousands of Native Americans hired to work in the mines at low wages.

But the years of mining eventually wreaked havoc on the reservations of the Navajo, Lakota Sioux, Spokane, and other Native American communities, leaving behind death and disease among tribal members.

## **Uranium and its lethal dangers**

When uranium is mined and milled, it creates radioactive dust and gas that are carried by the winds into the air. Large volumes of contaminated water are also released into rivers and lakes during the process. Throughout the areas sur-

rounding the production of uranium, the many forms of this dangerous debris cause severe health problems and environmental damage.

Because companies failed to install proper ventilation, working conditions for Indian miners turned out to be deadly. As they labored inside the shafts, they breathed in deadly air full of radioactive elements. Their incidences of lung cancer rose at an alarming rate. They also went home covered with the poison, and their families were exposed. Leukemia, bone cancer, and birth defects increased.

On the Spokane Indian Reservation in Washington State, Sherwood and Midnite were two mines operated respectively by Phelps Dodge, the notorious union-buster, and Newmont Mining Corporation, one of the largest mining corporations in the world.

During the years of operation, huge truck transports were used to ship the ore in and out of the mines. The people who lived along the routes had high incidences of cancer. It is in part because of this terrible history that many Pacific Northwest tribes are currently opposing a proposal for a giant new coal transportation port in Washington.

Thousands of mines on Native lands were abandoned during the 1980s when the demand for uranium decreased. Rather than spend money to clean up their ghastly mess, mining companies left behind hundreds of open pits filled with toxic waste for the tribes to deal with. Some of the waste has inevitably leaked into the drinking water and gotten into the food supply.

### **Environmental racism**

Most people know about the partial nuclear meltdown at Three Mile Island in Pennsylvania.

But few people know about the destructive nuclear accident a few months later at a privately owned mine at Church



Denver Post

*Native Americans protest outside a conference of uranium-mining interests and federal regulators in Denver, Colorado in May 2010.*

Rock, New Mexico, on July 16, 1979. A poorly constructed dam broke, spilling over one hundred million gallons of pooled radioactive waste into the Rio Puerco. The toxins flowed to Arizona and onto the Navajo reservation.

The mine's operator, the United Nuclear Corporation, remained silent right after the accident and failed to notify the Navajo Nation that lives were in danger. After the Centers for Disease Control were called, the indigenous community was finally notified about the radioactive waste seeping into the drinking water used both by people and livestock.

To this day, the corporation has not been fully held accountable for its negligence. It merely paid a small class-action settlement and put a very token amount of effort into cleaning up the mess.

The extent of the damage is appalling. The Church Rock Chapter of the Navajo Nation released a 2007 report describing elevated amounts of radioactive toxins in the affected areas.

Pollution, though, knows no borders. Don Yellowman is president of the organization Forgotten People, which

fighters for Native sovereignty and for social, environmental, and economic justice. “The water that southern Arizona consumes may be contaminated with radioactive nucleotides from the Church Rock spill,” Yellowman warned this reporter. “Indigenous people have been violated for centuries and everyone and every living thing is being poisoned in some form or fashion.”

Forgotten People demands immediate action from the U.S. government to remedy the radioactive uranium contamination and compensate its downwind victims.

### **Native American resistance**

For decades, First Peoples have stood strong against the rich and powerful mining industry.

Uniting with other environmentalists, Native resistance to new mining proposals and the buildup of nuclear power plants intensified in the 1970s and '80s. During the 1990s, the Western Shoshone and Paiute led protests to stop a nuclear waste dump on Yucca Mountain. In 2008, the Spokane won a complaint against Newmont Mining Corporation, which was ordered to pay a share of the multimillion-dollar cleanup.

The deadly threat is far from over, however, with the mining industry now lobbying to lift bans and regulations on uranium mining. Their efforts are prompted by the increased demand for uranium by the global nuclear energy industry.

Uranium surpluses are drying up in Europe, and U.S. corporations are looking for ways to commence their highly profitable toxic exploitation once again. Their well-funded propaganda machine is at it once more, cynically trying to convince people that nuclear energy is “safe and sanitary” compared to noxious, climate-change-inducing fossil fuels.

I’m reminded of a merry Disney cartoon that was shown to my class in grade school, which showcased characters

from the Magic Kingdom telling us about the promise of atomic power as an abundant and clean source of energy. The film left out, of course, the destructive nature of this energy.

In its goal of finding ways to make buckets of money, the capitalist market system does not plan for disastrous long-term impacts. Without a doubt, the immediate drive for profits has guided the mining industry to disregard the lives of Native Americans, communities of color, and a growing list of poor and working people. Their shortsightedness will impact everyone who lives on this one and only planet of ours for generations to come.

**Years of mining  
wreaked havoc  
on Native  
communities,  
and pollution  
knows no  
borders.**

The fight for our Earth is joined. Tribes are still fighting to stop the industry from polluting water and land. In January 2012, the Havasupai won a 20-year ban to stop proposed uranium mines around Grand Canyon. Navajos are currently blocking a uranium transport through their lands.

Environmentalists, or anyone who cares about the air we breathe, can look toward Native Americans, who are standing up against the mightiest of corporations. Indigenous leaders continue to raise awareness on the dangers of uranium mining and the need to safeguard our environment. They are building support and uniting with other environmental and anti-nuclear activists to stop the mining industry from poisoning Mother Earth. This is a battle we must win!