

Plight of Imprisoned African-Americans Worsens in the U.S. Historical Perspective

Political detainees are contracting COVID-19 and dying due to the pervasive injustices among incarcerated people

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Romaine “Chip” Fitzgerald was a member of the Black Panther Party (BPP) in Los Angeles, California during 1969 when he was arrested and prosecuted under the federal government’s Counter-intelligence Program (COINTELPRO) designed to liquidate the threat of revolutionary organizations in the United States.

[Fitzgerald](#) recently died in detention at the age of 71 after serving nearly 52 years in the prison-industrial-complex where he witnessed the phenomenal growth within the inmate population over a period of five decades.

The BPP became a central focus on the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) under former Director J. Edgar Hoover who had falsely declared the organization as the gravest threat to the national security of the U.S. Hoover had long been an advocate of racial segregation and anti-communism. He had vigorously spearheaded the investigations of communists and other radicals during the post-World War II period of the Cold War.

Prior to the late 1940s and 1950s, Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer of the Justice Department had been a mentor of Hoover’s. Palmer, the successor to Attorney General Thomas Watt Gregory who had prosecuted opponents of World War I through the Espionage Act of 1917, had after the first imperialist conflagration, led a witch hunt which resulted in the arrests, detentions and deportations of thousands of activists beginning in 1919.

Later Hoover would establish the FBI as a separate entity which sought to collect information, investigate and prosecute those considered enemies of the status-quo. The COINTELPRO project was officially initiated in 1956 directed against the Communist Party and its allied groups. Nonetheless, with the rise of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements after the mid-1950s through the early 1970s, the disproportionate focus of the FBI was aimed at the destruction of the African American liberation struggle.

With specific reference to Fitzgerald, he was accused of involvement in the shooting of a California Highway Patrolman (CHP) in September 1969 after a traffic stop. Fitzgerald and one officer were injured in the incident while he was able to escape. Later in October,

Fitzgerald was arrested in a BPP office and was later tried for the wounding of the CHP officer along with the murder of a private security guard outside a department store.

Evidence against Fitzgerald was lacking during the trial. He had others testify in the trial that he was not at the location of the robbing and killing of the security guard. However, largely as a result of the political bias against the BPP, he was convicted of murder and sentenced to the death penalty.

After 1972, when there was a supreme court decision which overturned capital punishment for four years, Fitzgerald was resentenced to two life terms in prison. He was repeatedly denied parole over the years yet in recent months due to his age and medical condition, was eligible for release.

Tragically enough Fitzgerald developed additional medical problems. He had suffered a stroke earlier and in recent months developed serious cardiovascular disease. His death came at a time when the plight of prisoners, particularly political detainees, has gotten considerable attention among social justice movements nationally and internationally.

According to a statement from Fitzgerald:

“The prison administrators and their advocates within the state want to create fear in the minds of the public in an effort to persuade the people to give state authorities carte blanche in the inhumane treatment of convicts and allow the prison administrators to operate without oversight and accountability.” (See [this](#))

In an extended letter from him which reads like a poem, Fitzgerald contemplates his release from decades of imprisonment in the state of California. He says of his hopes in part that:

“I will welcome the warmth and laughter of my grandchildren. I look forward to their hugs and smiles. I will be the Grandpa present to soothe them through occasional scrapes after they show me their somersaults and expert bike riding maneuvers.... I will continue to appreciate the love and challenges of family. I imagine our dialogue will include our sense of community, our country, the world, our contributions and help to our neighborhoods and, of course, sharing my personal sorrows and hope. I will lead by example with spontaneous acts of love, compassion and kindness thereby demonstrating my belief in the transformation of others. I will enjoy volunteering in preschools and/or visiting the elderly in convalescent hospitals.”

Romaine “Chip” Fitzgerald Is Not Alone

There are many other political detainees, prisoners of war and those unjustly incarcerated for purposes of bureaucratic advancement and the enrichment of the capitalist system, who are suffering and dying daily. Mumia Abu-Jamal, falsely charged and convicted during the early 1980s for the shooting death of a white police officer in Philadelphia, is an award-winning journalist and author of several books. Jamal spent more than two decades on death row and was eventually taken off after a global campaign to save his life. Jamal was a youth member of the BPP beginning in 1969 and later became a professional broadcast journalist. He was a supporter of the revolutionary MOVE organization in the city and defended the group against attacks by the corporate media and the police.

Jamal was recently diagnosed with COVID 19. He has suffered from Hepatitis C, diabetes, and skin disorders. His eyesight is failing all the while he has been held in maximum security prison for a crime he did not commit. Although Jamal has been given the right to an appeal, another trial has not taken place. Thousands nationally and internationally are continuing to demand his immediate release.

Other prisoners include Leonard Peltier, a leading member of the American Indian Movement (AIM), was convicted in the shooting death of two FBI agents in 1975. After being illegally extradited from Canada, he was railroaded through the U.S. courts and sentenced to life in imprisonment. Peltier also suffers from chronic ailments after being forced to remain incarcerated for over 40 years.

Image on the right: Assata Shakur in detention in New Jersey prior to her liberation



Assata Shakur, a former member of the BPP in New York and a soldier within the Black Liberation Army (BLA), was framed in the murder of a New Jersey State Trooper in 1973. She was liberated from prison in November 1979 by a taskforce of BLA and Weather Underground members and eventually granted political asylum in Cuba after living underground for a number of years in the U.S.

The National Jericho Movement, founded in the late 1990s, has since this time period sought to bring attention to the fact that there are political prisoners in the U.S. The Movement was organized with the assistance of political prisoners such as Jail Muntaqim, a former BLA soldier who served nearly five decades in prison. He was released during 2020 and is working to bring about the release of other comrades. Muntaqim was threatened with reincarceration under the guise of filling out a voter registration card last year.

Prisons Are Integral to the Capitalist System of Exploitation and National Oppression

In the U.S. there are more than 2.3 million people incarcerated. The number of those within the criminal justice system has grown by 500% since the early 1970s at the time of the Attica Rebellion and other forms of prison resistance.

African Americans, people of Latin American descent and proletarian people in general make up the overwhelming majority of those held behind bars. These inmates are forced to

work for slave wages producing goods and services for the capitalist and imperialist system. The exploitation of labor within the criminal justice structures represent another form of modern-day enslavement.

Moreover, the almost nonexistent state of healthcare within the prisons is endangering inmates, those working in the facilities along with their families and friends that visit the institutions. Although there has been the release of some inmates based upon compassion related to health concerns, far too many remain behind bars for nonviolent crimes which pose no threat to society.

The police and prisons grew out of the sordid history of the ruling class within the U.S. The continued existence of both institutions remains a threat to the struggle for total liberation and social emancipation.

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Featured image: Black Panther Party member Romaine Chip Fitzgerald dies in prison March 2021 (All images in this article are from the author)

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