

A story from this week's San Francisco Bay View:

The assassination of George Jackson

Lawyer and political activist Stephen Bingham remembers



Black Panther archivist Bill Jennings, in his report, "George Jackson Funeral," at http://www.itsabouttimebpp.com/Memorials/george_jackson_1.html, writes: "When the (church) doors opened, and we stepped outside with the body, I saw that the crowd had grown tremendously. There were people on rooftops, hanging from telephone poles and filling the streets. Everyone raised their fists in the air and chanted 'Long Live George Jackson.' It was a sight that could set a fire in your heart." - Photo: Stephen Shames

Last December, in okaying the execution of Stan Tookie Williams, California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger went out of his way to smear a whole history of Black struggle against racism. The most abuse of all was heaped on George Jackson – whose inclusion in Stan's dedication "is a significant indicator that Williams is not reformed," read Schwarzenegger's statement.

Jackson, author of the widely read prison memoir "Soledad Brother," had been thrown in jail for a petty robbery, and became a revolutionary behind bars. He was murdered in August 1971 by guards at San Quentin prison in an alleged "escape attempt."

Stephen Bingham, one of several lawyers working with Jackson, was accused of being part of the escape plot. He spoke to Socialist Worker's Joe Allen about George Jackson's legacy – and his own fight for justice.

Joe Allen: Could you tell us something about the life of George Jackson?

Stephen Bingham: George grew up in Los Angeles – like many young African Americans, in a hostile urban environment. He was in minor trouble a lot as a teen and eventually ended up in prison for a gas station holdup.

Min Yee's book "Melancholy History of Soledad Prison" explains well what the prison environment that held him until his death was like.

George objected to the apartheid-like conditions in prison – once famously sitting in the front row of the segregated movie room and requiring seven or eight guards to remove him for this Rosa Parks sit-in!

He became a marked man. After the guards at Soledad Prison orchestrated an interracial yard fight and their top sharpshooter killed three Blacks in the yard, a guard was thrown off a tier and killed. Weeks later, George and two other inmates, Fleeta Drumgo and John Clutchette, were charged with the guard's murder.

While the “Soledad Brothers” were awaiting trial, George came to the attention of Faye Stender of the National Lawyers Guild Prison Project. His letters to her and to his family became the central part of the book “Soledad Brother” that gained international prominence and brought enormous and unwanted attention on conditions inside California’s prisons.

Joe Allen: Were you surprised that Schwarzenegger specifically highlighted Jackson in the Stan Tookie Williams case?

Stephen Bingham: I was frankly surprised that the governor made such an explicit point about George in his clemency denial for Stan Tookie Williams.

I suspect the governor himself was relatively clueless about who George was. The question is who were the minions in the state department or the governor’s office itself who decided it was important to mention Williams’ admiration for George, as well as Nelson Mandela, Angela Davis, Malcolm X, Assata Shakur, Geronimo Pratt, Ramona and John Africa, Leonard Peltier and Dhoruba bin-Wahad.

That the governor refused clemency in part because Williams admired these people makes his execution one of the most political executions in modern history.

Joe Allen: How did you become involved in progressive politics and working as George Jackson’s lawyer?

Stephen Bingham: I grew up in a home with good liberal Democratic Party values in the 1950s, cut my teeth on the civil rights movement of the 1960s reporting on civil rights issues for my college newspaper. As a law student at Berkeley in the late ‘60s, I became further radicalized by the growing antiwar movement.

I was not George’s criminal defense lawyer. That was John Thorne. He asked the Bay Area chapter of the National Lawyers Guild for a volunteer lawyer to have some exploratory interviews with George, because he was interested in filing a civil rights lawsuit challenging the conditions of his and others’ detention in the Orwellian-named “Adjustment Center” (AC) at San Quentin State Prison (such a lawsuit was eventually successful). I volunteered.

Joe Allen: The state of California contends that George was killed during an “escape attempt” in 1971. Can tell you us something about the circumstances of his death?

Stephen Bingham: The state claimed that on a visit to George on Aug. 21, 1971, I somehow was able to smuggle a huge 9-mm Astra gun and a wig in to George, who allegedly then walked back to the AC after undergoing at least two strip searches, where he had to “spread his cheeks” and run his fingers through his hair to control for smuggling.

The state says he was able to gain control of the AC. Three guards and three inmates, including George, were killed in his “escape” attempt.

As I said above, I’m certain George was targeted. We know from the trial discovery that George was a key target of the FBI’s Counterintelligence Program (Cointelpro), but we were never given any documents.

It’s clear to me that his responsibility in bringing international attention to prison conditions in California brought on him the wrath of the California Department of Corrections. This, together with his designation as Field Marshal of the Black Panther Party, certainly put him in their crosshairs.

Joe Allen: The government also argued that you were part of his “escape attempt.” But much later in 1986, you were acquitted of all charges. Can you talk about that?

Stephen Bingham: I fled for my life in 1971, convinced I would be killed by jail guards if I surrendered then. State prison authorities never properly investigated what happened on Aug. 21. Many key people who could have possibly shed light on the events of that day were never interviewed. The crime scene was scrubbed clean before any independent investigators were permitted inside.

It was clearly a setup, all the more frightening politically because it sent a very scary message to political lawyers: Don’t get involved. And in fact, the event had a very chilling effect on prison work by lawyers throughout the country for many years. It’s interesting but sad that the conviction of Lynne Stewart may have a similar effect today. Hopefully not.

I lived in Europe, mostly France, for the next 13 years, returned in 1984 and was acquitted in 1986.

Joe Allen: What type of legal work do you do today?

Stephen Bingham: I work for Bay Area Legal Aid, which provides civil legal help to poor people (housing evictions, health access, family law for domestic violence survivors, public benefits). My specialty is welfare law, making sure that those who are entitled to welfare benefits get it.

I also direct a Legal Barriers to Employment Project, helping those on welfare with a myriad of legal issues making it hard to get or keep a job – e.g., suspended drivers licenses, criminal records, credit issues, defaulted student loans.

Joe Allen: What is the legacy of George Jackson that we should remember today?

Stephen Bingham: The legacy of George today is the ever-present need to have the courage to boldly confront injustice wherever we find it – whether it's based on race, sexual preference, national origin, disability or any of the other irrational them -vs.-us distinctions that have made the world a sometimes ugly place.

We must remain one with the people and realize that because many who are oppressed still identify with the oppressor, much of today's work is helping to change consciousness.

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