

Sundiata's Freedom is Your Freedom

A Publication of the Sundiata Acoli Freedom Campaign

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" His love for Black people is so intense that you can almost touch it and hold it in your hand. "

Assata Shakur

Sundiata Acoli is one of the longest held political prisoners in the United States. He is an extraordinary human being who, despite almost two decades of brutal and dehumanizing treatment at the hands of the U.S. government, remains firmly committed to the liberation of Black people in the United States. Although Sundiata is special, he is at the same time also representative of the many other Black people the United States has imprisoned for fighting for the liberation of their people. Indeed, Sundiata is one of the many Black political prisoners the U.S. has tried to bury inside its prisons; people who fought

Historical Background

Sundiata Acoli was born in 1937 in Vernon, Texas, a small town below the Panhandle, where he grew up, went to Booker T. Washington High School, did agricultural work, hunted, fished, played sports, and did all the other things kids do while growing up. Upon graduation he went to Prairie View A & M College

at Prairie View, Texas. He graduated in 1956 with a B.S. in Mathematics. After unsuccessfully looking for work in New York City, he took a job as a mathematician/computer programmer for NASA at Edwards Air Force base in California. Three years later Sundiata returned to New York where he worked with computers for the next 13 years.

The 1960s were a time of intense ferment and change, particularly among Black people. The civil rights movement and later the movement for Black liberation and power in-

and continue to fight to transform this country and who have been made to pay a heavy price.

As the 20th century nears its end, Sundiata Acoli is actually one of the longest held political prisoners in the world, having spent over 22 years in prison. For five years he endured 23 hours a day in a cell in a New Jersey prison which, according to the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, is smaller than the space requirements for a German shepherd dog. Sundiata also spent eight years locked down 23 hours a day in the worst prison in the United States, the United States Penitentiary at Marion. In fact, Sundiata, like so many other dissidents in the U.S., has been constantly brutalized in an effort to either destroy him or force him to renounce his politics. The efforts the U.S. has expended trying to destroy Sundiata is a testimony to his importance as a leader of the Black Liberation Movement.

In the last few years, we have seen the release of political prisoners in many parts of the world, from Nelson Mandela to Soviet dissidents. Yet here in the United States most people appear to be either unaware or unconcerned with our own Nelson Mandelas. We must change this situation if we ever hope to create a humane society.

The time is long past due to free Sundiata Acoli. But the only way this will happen is if there is enough of an outcry from people like you. We hope that you will commit some time and energy in this direction for two reasons. First, because the injustice of his 22-year imprisonment demands redress. And second, because his release will enable him to even more fully contribute to the struggle for the liberation of Black people in the U.S.

stilled a sense of new possibilities and transformation, as Black people *en masse* challenged the power structure.

Sundiata was an integral part of that process. He first became politically active in the summer of 1964, doing voter registration work in Mississippi with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. He was not a member of SNCC or any other organization. He was simply a computer programmer in New York City

who read about the murder of three civil rights workers. The article implied that the murders would deter volunteers from going south to register voters and it listed the Conference of Federated Organizations (COFO) in New York City as the coordinator of the volunteer project. Sundiata called COFO and volunteered. They said yes, if he paid his own fare to Mississippi. Sundiata bought an airline ticket and flew down. In the fall, he returned to his mathematician/computer career but felt that:

I couldn't be proud of survival under the system in America, because too many of my brothers and sisters hadn't survived. . . . I was aware of the subtle pressures working to force upon me the acceptance of white values, to give up more and more of being Black I loved being Black — the Black mentality, mores, habits and associations. I looked around for an organization that was dedicated to alleviating the suffering of Black people.

In 1968, Sundiata joined the Black Panther Party (BPP) chapter in Harlem. The BPP was one of the most important political organizations of the 1960s. It particularly captured the imagination and energy of young Black people and mushroomed into chapters in many cities. The BPP supported community programs such as community control of schools, tenant control of slum housing, free breakfast programs for school children, free health care, day care, and legal clinics, political education classes for the community, and publication of a weekly national newspaper. Perhaps most notably, the BPP also fought against rampant police brutality in the Black community and was committed to armed self-defense.

The Black Panther Party's enormous popularity was matched by an enormous hatred of the BPP by the United States government, which launched a major political/



CO unter INTEL ligence PRO gram

military offensive to destroy it as well as other Black organizations. The ultimate goal was to destroy the Black Liberation Movement. To this end, the FBI along with local police departments, unleashed what was later revealed to be the Counter Intelligence Program, otherwise known as COINTELPRO. Panther headquarters around the country were militarily assaulted by local and federal police forces. False rumors and divisions were propagated that caused internal squabbling in the Black movement. COINTELPRO also left scores of Black revolutionaries dead and many others imprisoned. For example, in 1969 alone, 28 Panthers, including Fred Hampton and Mark Clark, were murdered and 749 others were arrested and/or imprisoned.

Sundiata was one of those arrested. As he has written:

On April 2, 1969, i was arrested to stand trial in the Panther 21 case. Twenty-one of us were accused of conspiring to carry out a ridiculous plot to blow up a number of New York department stores and the New York Botanical Gardens. Although the legal process took two years and the trial lasted eight months — the longest criminal prosecution in New York history — the jurors took only 56 minutes to acquit all the defendants of every charge. Police agents appearing at the Panther 21 trial had also attended some group political education classes held at my apartment.

Although an ad hoc organization of my fellow workers named "Computer People for Peace" had raised and posted bail for me during the Panther 21 trial, and although several other defendants had been released on bail, the judge refused to let me out on bail. i had to do the entire two years on trial in jail until released on acquittal. i endured 2 years of political internment.

After Sundiata was released, he was constantly followed and harassed by the F.B.I. and local police forces. He finally decided that he could not be effective in the pursuit of Black liberation under these conditions, and so he went underground. On May 2, 1973, Sundiata, Assata Shakur, and Zayd Malik Shakur were ambushed by state troopers on the New Jersey Turnpike. The incident that ensued resulted in the murder of Zayd as well as the serious wounding of Assata. Trooper Werner Foerster was also killed by bullets of a state trooper's gun. Sundiata managed somehow to elude arrest on that day. However, police launched a two-day massive search of the surrounding area: "When i was arrested, police immediately

cut my pants off me so that i only wore shorts. Whooping and hollering, a gang of New Jersey state troopers dragged me through the woods, through water puddles, and hit me over the head with the barrel of their shot gun. They only cooled out somewhat when they noticed that all the commotion had caused a crowd to gather at the edge of the road, observing their actions.”

Sundiata was tried in an environment of mass hysteria and convicted, although there was no credible evidence he had killed the trooper or even been involved in the shooting. At sentencing the judge stated that Sundiata was an avowed revolutionary and sentenced him to life and to 30 more years, to be served consecutively!

Incarceration

Since his incarceration, Sundiata has been subjected to all the worst that U.S. prisons have to offer — and that is saying a lot. During his pre-trial detention he was denied all medical care, was kept in isolation the entire time, was permitted no visits from family, friends, or anyone except his attorney; and was not permitted to receive or read any newspapers. A light was kept on in his cell 24 hours per day, he was fed very sparse meals, and state troopers were allowed to come into the jail and threaten him.

After sentencing he was transferred to Trenton State Prison (TSP), New Jersey, which was built before the Civil War in 1835, and had been condemned for years as uninhabitable. Shortly after his arrival the warden visited San Quentin Prison in California to study its maximum security wing called MCU (Management Control Unit) or “O” Wing. He returned to Trenton and copied the exact setup, including the name MCU, and instituted it at Trenton State Prison. Overnight they rounded up 250 prisoners and put them in this instantly erected MCU. Sundiata was the first prisoner they rounded up. Within a month they had released the prisoners back into population except for about 50, including Sundiata. These 50 were accused of being “politically oriented.”

After many stays in the “doghouse,” contracting tuberculosis, and constant battling with prison officials, Sundiata, a state prisoner, was transferred to the United States Penitentiary at Marion, which is a federal prison. Marion, considered to be the worst prison in the U.S., has been condemned by Amnesty International for violating the United Nations’ Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners. Marion is located over a thousand miles from Sundiata’s home, and is supposedly reserved for prisoners who commit violent acts while in prison. (Sundiata had no such charges pending while at Trenton.)

Most prisoners at Marion are locked down for 22-23 hours per day, subjected to many degrading practices such as anal finger probes and being shackled spread eagle to their bed blocks. Drinking water at Marion Penitentiary is drawn from a federally-designated emergency toxic waste dump clean-up site, and many prisoners suffer unexplained skin rashes and benign tumors.

At Marion Sundiata was immediately put on controlled visit status (restricted to non-contact visits where prisoners spoke over the telephone while sitting in a small booth) as punishment for being the co-defendant of Assata Shakur, who had just escaped (in 1979) from the Clinton, New Jersey Women’s Prison. Sundiata remained on control visit status during his entire eight years at Marion, and was usually the only prisoner classified as such.

Sundiata writes:

“i was permitted visits with immediate family and attorneys only, with no friends or associates allowed. Because of the great distance and costs, these visits were possible only every one to three years. Prison officials constantly berated my children and threatened to cut off their visiting privilege for playing (i.e., not sitting still in the visiting booth). They once declared a baby blanket a non-permitted item, and took it out from under my daughter’s infant sister who was sleeping on the floor, causing the child and mother to cry. Only 24 total hours of visiting were permitted each month. Once my mother travelled 2000 miles to visit me, unaware that i had already used 16 visiting hours that month. Prison officials rudely cut off her visit after only 8 hours, causing my mother to cry. In another instance,



legal aide Anne Else traveled 550 miles to visit me. The FBI and Marion staff eavesdropped on our meeting until they were inadvertently discovered in the act by another prisoner, Leonard Peltier. The FBI then interrupted my visit and called Anne Else to the front office, where they attempted to interrogate, terrorize and intimidate her into not filing a lawsuit against them.

After eight years, in large part due to demonstrations at Marion and substantial national pressure to end the lockdown, Sundiata was transferred to Leavenworth. There he completed a computer course, paralegal studies, and a real estate course, all with honors.

In the fall of 1992, Sundiata was awarded the return of all his good time and became immediately eligible for parole.

Sundiata was not permitted to attend his own parole hearing. He was forced to participate via telephone. Despite an excellent prison work and academic record; despite the fact that Sundiata has never committed or even been charged with violence during his entire time in prison; despite a very positive report from the prison psychiatrist; despite numerous job offers in the computer profession; despite thousands of letters on his behalf; nonetheless, Sundiata was denied parole. Not only was parole denied but Sundiata was given a 20 year hit. This means that he must do more than 12 years before coming up for parole again. This was the longest hit in New Jersey history and was rendered at the conclusion of a 20 minute hearing via telephone!

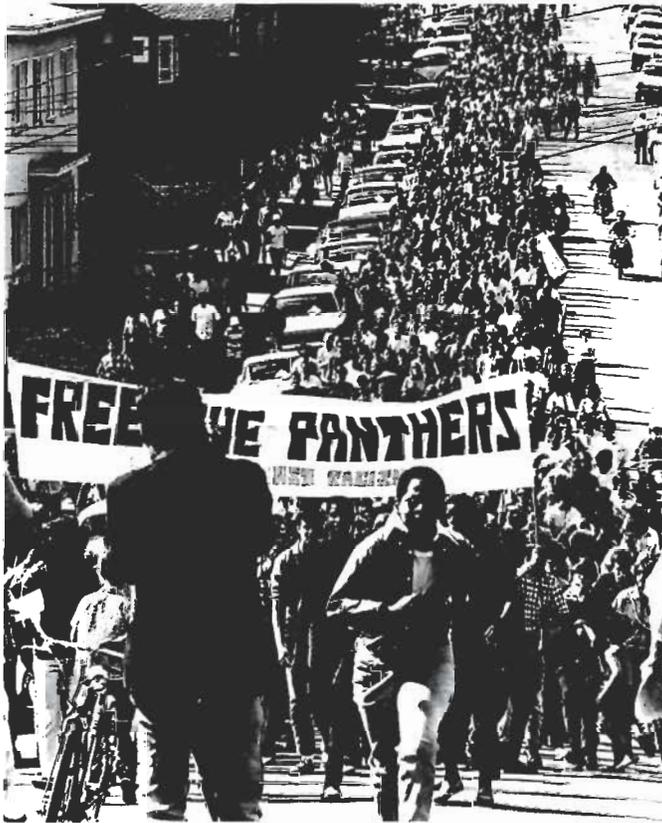
In April of 1994 Sundiata was transferred to U.S.P. Allenwood in Pennsylvania which is the maximum security prison complex for the East Coast.

Their stated reasons for the 20 year hit were their concern for Sundiata's membership in the Black Panther Party and the Black Liberation Army prior to his arrest,

concern that they had received hundreds of "Free Sundiata" form letters that characterized him as a New Afrikan P.O.W. who had contributed to the theory and practice of the New Afrikan Independence Movement, that the punitive aspects of his sentence had not been satisfied, rehabilitation had not been sufficiently achieved, he had not

changed appreciably during his incarceration and was in need of extensive counseling/therapy with a professional psychologist to address his antisocial behavior such that he would live a peaceful and law abiding existence within the existing governmental structure of the U.S.

The real reason for the 20 year hit is to continue the 20 year cover-up of what really happened on the Turnpike that night. This is why the Parole Board would not permit Sundiata to return to New Jersey to appear before them in person.



Assata Shakur was one of the key targets of COINTEL-PRO. She was called the "soul of the Black Liberation Army" by the government. After spending 6 years in prison, Assata Shakur escaped in 1979. In her autobiography, written from her new home in Cuba, Assata describes Sundiata's character:

There is something about Sundiata that exudes calm. From every part of his being you can sense the presence of revolutionary spirit and fervor. And his love for Black people is so intense that you can almost touch it and hold it in your hand.

Sundiata is a true hero. He has been an unceasing fighter for the liberation of Black people and for this he has been made to spend the last 22 years of his life in prison. And if we do not do something about it, the U.S. government will be only too pleased to watch Sundiata die in his cell. Join us in our campaign to ensure Sundiata's freedom.

For more information

about the efforts to free Sundiata or to be added to the mailing list, please write to: Sundiata Acoli Freedom Campaign, PO Box 5538, Manhattanville Station, Harlem, New York 10027. If you would like to order more of these pamphlets, please send requests to the above address or to Sundiata Acoli Freedom Campaign, 5122 S. Ada Street, Chicago, Illinois 60609. Single copies are free of charge. For multiple copies, please send a contribution for printing and postage.

Write to Sundiata

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