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‘Long live the spirit of Jonathan Jackson!’

written by Stephen Millies

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Two 17-year-olds at the door of history



Jonathan Jackson in the Marin County courthouse, California, August 7, 1970.

Jonathan Jackson was just 17 years old when he gave his life for oppressed people on Aug. 7, 1970. He went to the San Rafael, California, courthouse to free his older brother George Jackson, Fleeta Drumgo, and John Clutchette — known as the “Soledad Brothers.”

These three revolutionary inmates were charged with killing Soledad prison guard John Mills. Just before Mills was thrown over a third-floor railing, a grand jury exonerated fellow officer O.G. Miller for shooting to death Black inmates Cleveland Edwards, Alvin Miller, and W.L. Nolan on Jan. 13, 1970. Black witnesses weren’t even allowed to testify at the whitewash.

No evidence linked the Soledad Brothers to the killing of Mills. California Governor

and future U.S. President Ronald Reagan wanted to murder them in the state's gas chamber because they were revolutionaries.

George Jackson was internationally known for "Soledad Brother," a collection of his letters from prison. "I met Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, Engels and Mao when I entered prison and they redeemed me," he wrote.

George Jackson, a field marshal of the Black Panther Party, had already spent a decade behind bars for a \$70 robbery. As an 18-year-old, he was given a one-year-to-life sentence for being a passenger in a car whose driver allegedly stuck up a gas station.

Jonathan Jackson went to Judge Harold Haley's courtroom armed with guns. San Quentin prisoner James McClain was defending himself against frame-up charges of assaulting a guard following the beating to death of Black inmate Fred Billingsley by prison officials. Fellow inmates Ruchell Cinque Magee and William Christmas were witnesses for McClain.

Like the enslaved Africans who joined John Brown's band at Harper's Ferry, these three San Quentin prisoners immediately joined Jonathan Jackson's fight for freedom. Judge Haley, assistant prosecutor Gary Thomas, and three jurors were made their prisoners.

"We are revolutionaries," they proclaimed. "We want the Soledad Brothers free by 12:30."

Capitalist state sacrifices a judge

According to Black Panther Party veteran Kiilu Nyasha, "The plan was to use the hostages to take over a radio station and broadcast the racist, murderous prison conditions and demand the immediate release of the Soledad Brothers." (San

Francisco Bay View, August 3, 2009)

But the capitalist class would rather kill one of their judges than let Black people go free. As Jonathan Jackson drove away in a van, San Quentin guards and court cops started firing.

Jonathan Jackson, James McClain, and William Christmas were killed, along with Judge Haley. Ruchell Cinque Magee and assistant D.A. Thomas were wounded.

The courageous action of these four Black heroes at San Rafael shook the capitalist state from Nixon in the White House to the local police precinct. "Psychologically the slave masters have been terrified by the boldness and innovative tactical conception," wrote Fred Goldstein. "No court is safe anymore." (Workers World, Aug. 20, 1970)

Scapegoats had to be found. Survivor Ruchell Cinque Magee and Angela Davis, who had chaired the Soledad Brothers defense committee, were put on trial.

Jonathan Jackson was a bodyguard for Angela Davis, and three of the guns used at the San Rafael jailbreak were registered under her name. That was enough for Reagan to try to send Davis to the gas chamber as a "conspirator" who was responsible for Haley's death.

In 1969 Reagan got trustees at the University of California Los Angeles to fire the philosophy professor for being a member of the Communist Party.

For two months, Angela Davis eluded the FBI, which put the Black communist on its "ten most wanted" list. FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover listed her as "armed and dangerous" — an excuse to shoot her on sight. President "Watergate" Nixon congratulated Hoover for the capture of Davis and labeled the Black woman a "terrorist."

From her prison cell, Angela Davis declared, “Long live the spirit of Jonathan Jackson!”

Free Angela! Free Ruchell!

The Black Community mobilized coast-to-coast to defend their sister. Over 200 “Free Angela Davis” defense committees were formed. People rallied in Cuba, the Soviet Union, and the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) as well. A jury acquitted Angela Davis of all charges on June 4, 1972.

Ruchell Cinque Magee was tried separately from Angela Davis. Magee adopted the name “Cinque” after the African leader of the 1839 slave revolt on the ship Amistad.

The original Cinque was freed by a Connecticut court. Ruchell Cinque Magee, who was also part of a slave revolt, was convicted of kidnapping after murder charges were dismissed.

Judge Morton Colvin refused to adjourn the trial for a single day after Magee’s mother died. Yet Colvin recessed the hearing for two days following former President and Ku Klux Klan member Harry Truman’s death. At one point, the bigot-in-robes kicked all 40 Black spectators out of the courtroom. (Jet, March 1, 1973) An appeals court forced Colvin to allow former Attorney General Ramsey Clark to help defend Cinque. Jury foreman Bernard J. Suares stated in a 2001 affidavit that the jury actually voted to acquit Cinque of kidnapping for the purpose of extortion.

Ruchell Cinque Magee would remain in jail for another 50 years until he was finally released on July 21 at the age of 83. He was the longest-held political prisoner in the United States and possibly the world.

It shows how barbaric U.S. capitalism is that Comrade Magee spent over six decades in prison. (He had earlier been framed and served time in Louisiana.) An

accomplished jailhouse lawyer, Cinque had helped free dozens of inmates.

One year after his younger brother sacrificed his life, George Jackson was assassinated by prison guards on Aug. 21, 1971. George Jackson's murder sparked the Attica prison rebellion less than three weeks later. Billionaire New York Gov. Nelson Rockefeller had 29 prisoners slaughtered.

On March 27, 1972, the two remaining Soledad Brothers — Fleeta Drumgo and John Cluchette — were acquitted by a San Francisco jury.

John Cluchette would finally be released from prison 36 years later, on June 6, 2018. Fleeta Drumgo would be killed in 1979 in a suspicious Oakland street shooting.

Another 17-year-old makes history

"Courage in one hand, the machine gun in the other," was how George Jackson described his 17-year-old brother Jonathan. Vladimir Ulyanov was also 17 years old when his older brother Alexander was hanged in 1887 for trying to kill a tyrant called the Russian Czar.

Thirty years later, Vladimir Ulyanov — now known as Lenin — led the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. Back in 1887, it seemed that the Russian Empire — like the United States today, a big prison house — was far from having a revolution.

The execution of Alexander Ulyanov affected Lenin so much that he could barely write about it. There are only two references to his brother in Lenin's collected works. Yet thinking of Alexander's execution must have helped Lenin develop his nerves of steel.

Lenin came from a better-off family than that of George and Jonathan Jackson. His father was a school superintendent who wanted peasants to be educated.

Despite the bloody overthrow of Reconstruction and thousands of lynchings, Black people built thousands of schools. Their literacy rate in 1917 was higher than that of Russian peasants, while the literacy rates of other peoples in the Czarist empire were often much lower.

Yet by 1957 — 40 years after the Bolshevik Revolution — the peoples of the Soviet Union sent the world's first satellite called "sputnik" into outer space because of socialism.

Above all, Lenin had time to learn and organize — time that was denied to both Jonathan and George Jackson.

Today over two million people are locked-up throughout the United States. Four million have just been kicked off Medicaid. The minimum wage can buy about half what it could in 1968.

We need a revolution just as much as the workers and peasants ground down by the Czar did.

One of the first steps is to free political prisoners like Leonard Peltier, Mumia Abu-Jamal, and Ed Poindexter. Free them all!



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