

Black Political Imprisonment Symposium April 23, 2011 phone interview with former black panther and political prisoner Marshall "Eddie" Conway

Frank Wilderson, III: Hi, Eddie. How would you think about the difference in black political incarceration to other politically incarcerated people?

Marshall "Eddie" Conway: Actually, I think, historically, you have to put this in a historical context. After slavery, there was an explosion of penitentiaries and prison systems implemented throughout the United States. Certainly even then, it was an economic arrangement, but now I think it's even more an economic arrangement on the backs of African descendants.

But, I think probably more important than that is that there is a need for the community to kind of bring back that they that the had say in the '50s, the '60s, the '70s, the love for the community, the sense of being black and proud, that sense of connectedness that I don't think exists now. When you look at say the Puerto Rican community or other communities, you find that they tend to rally around their political prisoners, prisoners of conscience, prisoners of war, etcetera. If you look at the environmental movement, there is a level of love there that I think is missing maybe in the black community because we spent so much time struggling for survival. There is the low-intensity guerrilla warfare going on around the drug trades in our community. There is a separation between what's happening with our prisoners and our community based on the fact that there is a problem right there...that separates us from a portion of our young black men and women.

So I think that love is missing. I think that's important. I think that we need to reestablish that love in our community before we can even do anything about what's happening with the prisoners in the prison system because if you don't have that love, you can't develop the unity. If you can't develop the unity, you're never going to be successful in organizing anything concrete. So, that might be a long answer, but that's what I'm seeing.

Wilderson: Thank you.

Matt Richardson: What are some of the things that we could be doing here that would be supportive and useful for you?

Conway: Education obviously is the very first thing that needs to happen. People need to be made aware of what the prison industrial complex is doing on the one hand and how many people of African descent are actually incarcerated and the reasons why and they also probably need to be made aware that there was resistance and struggle and that there are people locked up as a result of this that are political prisoners today that was working in the interest of the community 40, 50 years ago, 10 years ago, etcetera. Then I think it's important to kind of support those people. Write letters. Find out what you can do in your neighborhood, your community to pass resolutions that says this needs to be corrected. Make it an issue

that the national black organizations pick up because a lot of what is going on is that no pressure is being put on anybody to even address the issue, you know. It needs to be brought up in Congress. It needs to be brought up on the local level.

Wilderson: You've probably heard of Mutulu Shakur's idea for a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Do you have any thoughts on that?

Conway: [Laughter]

Richardson: I hear laughter.

Conway: Well, it's a good idea. The thing of those Truth and Reconciliation arrangements, always arrangements that allows the people that were primarily responsible for committing crimes against victims to kind of like go free, to be exonerated and the people that were victims still end up suffering the consequences of whatever crime was committed. I see that in South Africa. I see that in Uganda. I see that in Rwanda. And the real deal is that most of the people who committed the crimes against the black community, the poor community, communities of color, working-class people, etcetera, they have become wealthy, they have become powerful, they've been promoted....they have no guilt. I mean it's almost like trying to the slave masters to come up and say, "oh, we're sorry for holding you in slavery like they did up at Brown or somewhere..." The consequences of slavery is still in the community and has impacted the people. So I don't know how much we're going to get from people that have made their wealth and their careers out of abusing and oppressing other people. I have a problem seeing that actually happen and then even if it did happen, does that mean that they're going to let hundreds of political prisoners out? Are they going to pay us for those last 40 years? Or, is somebody gonna just say one day, "we're sorry."

James: Eddie if I could add to the question, Ben Chaney who is the brother of James Chaney and he heads the James Chaney Foundation. Of course, Chaney was lynched in Philadelphia, Mississippi along with Goodman and Schwerner. He has what he's calling the National Coalition of Reconciliation and Justice. So I hear what you said about how much truth is going to come out of it if you're dependent on the state, you know, the different police agencies to tell what they actually did against activists... but he's compiling 88 profiles of people incarcerated, so the more high profile, not high in terms of the general population, but among of activists, would be people tied to the BPP, but he has additional people who were not associated with the Party, so I'm wondering if you see a role for a National Coalition of Reconciliation and Justice where it's really an educational campaign. He wants to focus on the HBCUs and the black churches and then perhaps Black Studies or Africana/African and African Diaspora Studies in large universities.

Conway: You know, I support even though I laugh.... The word justice is important to me and I think that when you add that into truth and reconciliation, you add justice, you're implying that there is going to be made whole or made good in some

kind of way whatever crimes were committed at some point for the victims. Now, firstly, it's a good idea as an educational strategy to raise the profile of the cases, to talk to larger audiences. I definitely support that as long as it's understood that there needs to be some kind of redress other than an apology. In all too many cases, people responsible have passed on, but there are some people 80 or 70 years old still around... There needs to be redress, but also the victims need to be made whole. Obviously, you can't give people time back, but you can do something even if it's a collective fund for the legal defense of political prisoners or whatever...but something needs to happen beyond, "well, we're sorry."

Jaime Alves: We have some people here also from Brazil, from other places within the African Diaspora. As we try to understand the US, you know, democracy and also try to extend some knowledge, we struggle. I would ask you, do you see any possibility of an international alliance with black people in other places like, for example, in Brazil. How would you...look like on the ground?

Conway: Actually, out of a lack of the developing consciousness that is happening in Brazil in terms of the struggle for rights of African descended people down there...I think it's, when I look at it, and I'm sure I'm probably wrong, but it looks like maybe it is what we were doing in the 60s and 70s and I think it might be a place in which this could be part of their struggle. There could be support developed down there around the political prisoner aspect here in America...and in the Caribbean and everywhere else because pretty much all of us are in a collective boat of racist oppression, etcetera, from the tip of South America up to probably Canada, you know. And so we do need to be connected and connect the struggles. I just don't know how you reach them at this point because I know they're struggling now even though they have a progressive president down there. I see that there is still a lot of problems in the black community.

Joao Costa Vargas: Before the next question is thrown at you, Eddie, I just want to communicate to you that Roderick King Wilkerson is sitting right next to you and he has asked me to tell you that you have his unconditional support to whatever initiative you think needs to be taken on.

Conway: Ok. That's actually good. Actually, we're going to probably end up talking in the next couple weeks because I really want to probably collaborate with him to do something around political prisoners both inside and outside and kind of like have a dialogue around that, so that's a good thing. And, I will be in touch in a minute.

Roderick King Wilkerson: Alright Eddie. This is King. How are you brother?

Conway: I'm good.

King: I know when you say good I understand the context.

One of my young comrades whose birthday is on the 21st, I gave him a copy of your book as a little birthday present.

King: Alright. Very nice.

Well. I wanted to say in regard to connecting with me and connecting with political prisoners, I don't know if you've been following the things that we've been doing, but we have been trying to connect with a movement nationally and internationally and we have folks both sides of the oceans... I think what we are trying to do is raise the bar for everyone and we're trying to do it in a sense of...we want to point out the fact that you know slavery.... (I'm saying something that is like preaching to the choir. You already know this.) I was on a hill two weeks ago with Congressman Conyers and this other man from rich man Louisiana and they are part of the film in Atlanta, the freedom film that what we have and they are concerned, very concerned with the way prison, the inflation of the population has exploded and especially with people of color and people of African descent. So, they're taking a look at, actually the Justice Department is also.... They intend to take a look and they're starting with Louisiana and they will see that Louisiana is just the tip of the iceberg. But, in any event, I don't want to take all the time, I just want you to know that you have my support, you have our support and we are trying to raise the bar for everyone because everyone, we got political prisoners and we got political victims because everyone in prison, you know... is just a continuation of slavery really and they are there because they were victims of a political system that oppresses the repressed....

I'm preaching to the choir, but this is our approach to it and I think we finally have some people's ears listening to what we're trying to say. I was in London about a month ago with people from Amnesty International. They have taken our case (we have a civil case as well)...and they are using this case as, you know, a catalyst to attack the human rights issue that is involving especially long-term confinement. And, also something that is unprecedented, the American Civil Liberties Union has taken an interest. They initially had our case, but they have also taken an interest in the fact that long-term solitary confinement is unconstitutional. They want to do it undermining the system. Of course, people grassroots can still protest, throw they rocks, throw they pebbles, throw they mountains into the pond and continue to get the ripples, but I think unless we continue, people at the grassroots level continue to make these ripples, these waves in the water, the people in the mainstream, the people in DC...like people are hearing now, they won't hear it.

Conway: OK. The work you're doing is good. I'm keeping up with it.

King: Fair enough and again, know that we are at your disposal and we'll help in any way we can and I look forward to dialoguing in a couple weeks or so.

NBUF Representative: My name is Falada Nezimoto (sp?) of the National Black United Front and I want to know, what organizations and what tactics to do you find the most beneficial to you personally and others that are incarcerated?

Conway: Well, to be quite honest, these forums are good forums. The organizing forums like this is a good thing. Obviously doing fundraising is good because political prisoners are always either impoverished or need legal assistance. Most of the time they are locked down, the majority of them are actually locked down, so that's good. But, I think that anything that people do, anything that organizations do in support of political prisoners is good and I don't come down actually on the side of any particular thing... It's almost like King was just saying, every rock in the pond makes a ripple and all of that helps create a national consciousness around the issue. Okay?

NBUF: Okay.

Participant: So I teach and I'm just wondering, what book has made a big impression on you that I might introduce my students to and do you want reading material from us?

[Electronic Prison Recording: You have one minute left.]

Conway: Well they're getting ready to cut me off. But, if you're teaching about political prisoners, please use my book, *The Greatest Threat*. If you get an opportunity, I think Joy has one or we could send you one if you could give the people your name and stuff, but look at it because it's a good overview and research piece on the political prisoners in America and the history of political prisoners, so that's the book I would recommend.

Participant: Thank you. So, it's his book, *The Greatest Threat*.

Conway: They're going to cut me off.

Participants: Thank you so much, Eddie.