

Shocking Case Of Black American Political Prisoners In France

By Deborah Major

As Andrew Young is quietly recovering from reactions to his gentle criticisms of the United States and its treatment of its own political prisoners, four Black American political prisoners await an American mandated trial in Paris for a crime that was not committed in, and did not involve, France.

The four are Jean and Melvin McNair, Joyce Tilleron, and George Brown, who in 1972 successfully hijacked a Delta Airlines plane and landed in Algiers, Algeria, with \$1 million to be used to help support the struggle for liberation that Afro-Americans were waging under the banner of the then revolutionary Black Panther Party.

Although the Algerians immediately returned the money, they did grant the Black Americans political asylum. However, the four were erroneously led to believe that extradition awaited them. So they clandestinely went to France, a country that has historically protected people who sought refuge within its borders for religious, racial, or political repression suffered in their own lands.

They lived in freedom until May 26, 1976, one week following the voluntary return of Eldridge Cleaver to the United States, when the French government arrested them on a request from the U.S. government for their immediate extradition. The Franco-American Treaty states that for political infractions--infractions committed with a political motivation--there will be no extradition.

Therefore, on Nov. 15, 1976, the French court found that "their action, which today they declare to regret, was committed in order, as they affirm, to escape the segregation to which they were subjected in the United States because they are members of the Black race; to avoid the persecution to which they felt they were exposed because of subversive activity that they were carrying on in the Black community; finally, above all, to contribute to the Black Liberation Movement by drawing the attention of world public opinion and in obtaining a large sum of money for the Black Panther Party, certain leaders of which were already exiled in Algeria..."

Extradition was denied in response to a coalition of French and American artists, writers, Nobel Prize winners, university professors, and organizations, such as the French Commission of the World Peace Movement, who brought to light the issues in the case.

Today the four face another trial. A recent Franco-American Treaty says the French must try hijackers in cases of nonextradition, even though the act in no way touched the jurisdiction of France. This trial will set a precedent, as it will be the first time that people who broke a law in one country will be tried for the infraction in another. Under pressure from the U.S. government these four face trial today in a climate decidedly less responsive to their predicament than in 1972.

The recent wave of violent terrorism sweeping Italy and

Germany in no way reflects the revolutionary activities of 1972 when hijackings happened on a weekly basis, where there were few, if any, security measures at airports and no violence. The Winston-Salem Journal reported Aug. 1, 1972, that in the Algerian hijacking there were "no explicit threats" and "The whole thing happened with considerable calm. There was no threat of violence at any time..." Today the climate of insurrection is considerably more violent and the courts are more conservative in the face of such actions.

The United States made an additional request for the single extradition of George Brown, for a prison escape from a sentence for a crime he did not commit after the victim testified that Brown and his friend, also arrested but acquitted, were not the men who had robbed him. The witness was persuaded that these were indeed the culprits.

The French court requested documents to help it make an informed decision on the political nature of Brown's former life, including information on his encounter with the Detroit Stress Force, which wounded him with six bullets and then unsuccessfully attempted to frame him for armed robbery. After 14 months of silence the United States responded that the documents were not available and the French government has no need of them since Brown was a non-political criminal. In June 1978 the court ruled in favor of Brown's extradition to complete the remainder of his sentence.

The Defense Committee of the Fleury Four, a name taken from the prison they have been held in since 1976, including such prominent names as James Baldwin, Simone Signoret, and Andrew Zweyacker, seeks to bring public pressure to encourage the court to be lenient in trying the hijacking, which the four now state they "deeply regret...because we are convinced that such acts, far from serving the cause of our people, as we thought at the time, do a great harm to our struggle." They also seek to stop Brown's extradition and to win the right of asylum for the four and allow them to rejoin their children and return to the friends, family, and jobs that are waiting for them in France.

The Defense Committee is encouraging organizations and individuals to write to the French courts to inform them of the repressive conditions that would await Brown if he were extradited and to ask the French government to continue its tradition of offering asylum. The committee stresses that granting political asylum to the four Black Americans should not be taken as a political position against the United States, but as an action in favor of political freedoms.

Letters should be addressed to: Comité de Défense des 4 de Fleury, c/o Marcel Henriot, 2, Allée Maurice Ravel, 92260 Fontenay aux Roses, France.