

# The life and death of a sharecropper

Formal equality before the law is relatively new for black people in the USA. Until the 1960s they suffered under a "Jim Crow" system not far from apartheid. The story of Odell Waller shows how monstrous it was. The case of Mumia Abu-Jamal (see page 5), the victim of an imminent legal racist lynching, shows how monstrous US racism still is.

ODELL WALLER'S execution rated only a few lines in the capitalist press. The most liberal of them buried the news in tiny scraps on the inside pages.

For two years the Waller case was fought through the courts. Waller didn't have a chance before the prejudice-ridden juries of the South. The metropolitan dailies knew it. The politicians, North and South, knew it. The Supreme Court, which refused to review his case, knew it. And so did President Roosevelt.

They were, some of them, perhaps a little embarrassed by the Waller case. There it was, sticking out like a sore thumb — challenging the hypocritical structure of "class unity", and presidential pleas against race discrimination... in the interests of better prosecuting the war.

When it was all over, when Waller — railroaded by the due process of Jim Crow law — went to his death in an electric chair on July 2, they breathed a sign of relief. For them the Waller case was over — and good riddance!

But they are mistaken, greatly mistaken!



Who was Waller? A Negro sharecropper, working sun-up to sun-down under the lash of Jim Crow-rule. Denied even those few fragments of privileges allowed fellow workers of a different race, and different occupation. That's all — just a sharecropper. That's his life story: he worked, got into trouble, worked some more, lived meagrely from moment to moment and finally died by decree of a Virginia court.

Two years ago he shot his landlord. Yes, he shot his landlord — and never denied it. He shot when he thought his landlord was reaching for a gun — shot him during a quarrel over Waller's share of a jointly tended wheat crop. Oscar Davis, his white landlord, had refused to surrender Waller's share.

In any court Waller's defense would have stood up — if Waller weren't Negro, if his landlord weren't white. There are legal arguments enough: self-defense, extenuating circumstances. Had the roles and colours been reversed, it would have been simple enough, merely a matter of procedure. Lynchers are never convicted in the South.

Waller didn't have a chance.

Who tried him? His peers? Workers, sharecroppers, Negroes, the oppressed and exploited? That's what the law provides — a jury of peers. But not for a Negro, hence not for Waller. Waller was tried by a white, poll tax jury, upholding the Jim Crow tyranny of Southern justice.

Waller did not have a fair trial, as constitutionally provided. It was up to the Supreme Court to intervene, order a new trial. But the Supreme Court turned its head, refused to acknowledge the glaring injustice.

Governor Darden of Virginia could have saved him. President Roosevelt, by public repudiation of the injustice, might have saved him. Neither of them did.

The Waller case may have ended for the New York Times or the "liberal" New York Post but it hasn't ended, and *never will* so long as one negro remains the victim of race discrimination.

Waller cases, some of them cruder, some of them less crude, repeat themselves in a multiplicity of ways every day.

Every time a Negro is denied the right to a job, the Waller case is repeated.

Every time a Negro is barred from a restaurant, the Waller case is repeated.

Every time a Negro is lynched, the Waller case is repeated. And a Negro was lynched in Tuskegee, Alabama, the very week that Waller was legally murdered!

There isn't a Negro in this country who won't bear the scar of Waller's death so long as capitalist class and race injustice continues. There ought not to be a white



*"Have you ever thought about some people are allowed a chance over and over again, then there are others allowed little chance, some no chance at all..."*

*I accident(ally) fell and some good people tried to help me. Others did everything they could against me so the governor and the coats (courts) dont no (know) the true facts.*

*In my case I worked hard from sun-up until sun-down trying to make a living for my family and it ended in death for me.*

*You take big people as the President, governors, judge, their children don't never have to suffer. They has plenty money. Born in a mention (mansion) nothing ever to worry about. I am glad some people are that lucky.*

*The penitentiary all over the United States are full of people ho (who) was pore tried to work and have something, couldn't, so that maid them steel and rob."*

Odell Waller (from his last statement)

worker who forgets this new victim on the long list of class injustice.

Victimized as he was by "whites", Waller knew the source of his persecution. In his statement there is no reference to "whites" against "blacks." In the two years of his incarceration and defense, Waller learned that — if he didn't know it before.

It wasn't the "whites" who sent Waller to his death. It was that tiny group of "whites" who live off the exploitation of the millions, black and white alike. They executed Waller, the way others of them executed Sacco and Vanzetti, who were white.

There are white sharecroppers and there are Negro sharecroppers, and the one is little better off than the other. There are white workers and Negro workers, and the one is fundamentally little better off than the other. The boss system which thrives on the double exploitation of the Negro worker, which seeks to divide him from his *only* ally — the white worker — is the enemy of that white worker as much as of the Negro worker.

The Waller case will end only when that boss system is replaced by a workers' system. By a workers' government, organized by Negro and white workers. By a workers' socialist government under which all men will truly be free and equal! ☐

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