

Snapshots of America's brutal society: two more executions, another police killing

Kate Randall
3 September 1999

Executions in Texas and Missouri

On September 1 the state of Texas executed Raymond Jones, the 100th execution carried out in the state under Republican presidential frontrunner and Governor George W. Bush. Twenty-two men have been put to death in Texas so far this year alone.

On the same day 49-year-old David Leisure was executed in Missouri. Leisure's attorneys had appealed to the US Supreme Court and Missouri Governor Mel Carnahan to halt the execution, claiming he did not receive a fair trial. They said Leisure was mentally retarded and had been drug and alcohol dependent since he was 13 years old. They also argued that an individuals involved in his defense had been using drugs at the time of his trial. The courts and the governor rejected the appeals.

Also on September 1, the US Supreme Court granted a stay of execution to Lonnie Weeks, Jr., who was scheduled to be put to death that day in Virginia. Weeks's lawyers had filed a petition to the court saying the jury in his trial had been confused by sentencing instructions, and that the trial judge had refused to answer a question from the jury as to whether they were required to impose a death sentence.

Virginia authorities want to destroy DNA evidence in executed man's case

A team of lawyers and death penalty opponents are seeking access to DNA samples from the case of Joseph O'Dell III, who was executed in 1997 for the 1986 murder of a 44-year-old secretary. Although DNA evidence from the victim's body was presented at trial, much more sophisticated testing is available today.

Virginia prosecutors want to burn the DNA samples, which would effectively close the case. "If we allow [new DNA tests] to occur, then lawyers for every executed inmate would tie up the courts trying to have

DNA evidence tested after the fact," said David Botkins, a spokesman for Virginia Attorney General Mark L. Early.

Since courts first allowed new DNA testing of prisoners, 62 people have been freed because of the new evidence, including some death row inmates. However, were DNA tests to exonerate O'Dell, he would be the first person put to death who was subsequently cleared by such evidence.

Federal probe opened into California police shooting

Assistant US Attorney Mike Gennaco has requested the FBI open a civil rights violation investigation into the August 9 shooting of Mario Paz in Compton, California. Paz, a 61-year-old grandfather of 14 and Mexican national, was shot twice in the back by El Monte police during a nighttime raid on his home.

Police had obtained a warrant to search Paz's home in connection with a narcotics case. With more than a half-dozen people inside, a SWAT team shot off the house's door locks and tossed a "flash-bang" grenade inside. They then stormed inside and found Mario Paz asleep in his bedroom. The sheriff's department has provided conflicting explanations for shooting the man, including claims that he was reaching for his gun, a contention strenuously disputed by his family.

Other recent California civil rights probes include investigations into the shooting of Margaret Mitchell, a handicapped homeless woman in Hancock Park, and the case of Tyisha Miller, a young black woman shot to death in her car by Riverside police.

Market principles applied to Michigan daycare regulations

Michigan Governor John Engler and the state's Office of Regulatory Reform have proposed plans to restructure the rules for the state's 4,766 child care

centers. The changes include abolishing minimum size requirements for play spaces, deleting specific diaper-changing standards, and allowing fewer caregivers to watch more children.

The theory is that market forces will determine which centers offer the best services, phasing out those offering substandard care. But the 230,000 young children placed in these centers by their parents—often at costs which strain family budgets—would become the unwitting victims of this fair market scheme. Steve Manchester, a public policy analyst with the Michigan Association for the Education of Young Children, said of the plan, "To them, child care is little more than warehousing in reasonably warm and dry places and can be easily done by anyone."

Tom Martin, regulatory affairs officer for the state department of Consumer and Industry Services, commented, "Is it the responsibility of government to put this requirement on the backs of every child care center in the state? Our answer is "No."

Blacks account for half of US AIDs deaths

Although overall AIDS deaths have dropped in the US, blacks account for approximately half of all new HIV infections, new AIDS cases and AIDS-related deaths, although they comprise only 13 percent of the population. AIDS deaths dropped last year to 17,047, a 20 percent reduction over 1997 figures, but this included 8,316 deaths among blacks.

Among the nation's women, blacks account for 64 percent of new HIV infections. In New York City black women are about three times more likely to die of AIDS than Hispanic women. Dr. Harlene Gayle, head of the Centers for Disease Control's National Center for HIV, said that poverty and racism play a large role in determining who contracts the disease and who receives aggressive treatment to prolong life.

Drug-resistant strains of tuberculosis found in 45 states

Drug-resistance strains of tuberculosis were reported in 45 states and the District of Columbia during 1998. While overall TB cases were down in 1997—a total of 18,361 cases, or 8 percent fewer than in 1997—8 percent of these cases were resistant to the "first-line" drug isoniazid and just over 1 percent were resistant to both isoniazid and rifampin. These drug-resistant TB strains are more likely to be found among foreign-born US residents than among native-born population.

Officials of the Centers for Disease Control report that although overall figures for TB are declining, the national goal of reducing TB incidence to 3.5 cases per 100,000 by the year 2000 is "unlikely to be achieved at the current rate of decrease."

Cars won't start if the bill isn't paid

Detroit-area car dealer Mel Farr is leasing cars to people with poor or no credit, charging interest rates of up to 25 percent. But customers must make their weekly payments in order to receive a code to punch into a device on the dashboard—or the car will not start. Farr's scheme targets low-income workers who desperately need transportation to get to their jobs in a metropolitan area where public transportation is among the worst in the country. Customers are charged a minimum of \$200 a month to lease old model cars.

Two women have filed lawsuits claiming the device had shut off their engines while they were driving, despite having made their payments on time. They also claim they were not told their cars would be equipped with the devices until after they had made their down payments. One of the plaintiffs, Chavela Jones, said her car cut off as she and her three-month-old daughter were traveling in the fast lane of the freeway. She pays \$75.96 a week to lease a 1991 Ford Escort.

Upon leasing their vehicles, customers are shown a video starring Mel Farr, outfitted in his trademark Superman outfit, urging them not to squander their money on hair care, manicures and clothing. "If you don't pay us, I'll do everything in my power to find you and take my car back," Farr warns.

Farr is the owner of the Mel Farr Automotive Group, the biggest black-owned business in the US, and is a favorite of the Rev. Jesse Jackson. He was recently given \$36.5 million in new financing by Wall Street to expand his business.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact