

The execution of Stanley Tookie Williams

The WSWS Editorial Board
13 December 2005

The gruesome death watch set in motion by the refusal Monday of California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger to grant clemency culminated shortly after midnight in the state murder by lethal injection of Stanley Tookie Williams.

The horrifying event, replete with television shots of the awaiting death chamber, was a testament to the backwardness of American society, and the degeneracy of the US ruling elite and its political and media servants. Williams, a founder of the Crips gang in Los Angeles who was convicted of multiple murders in 1981, went to his death insisting on his innocence. More than a decade ago Williams, 51, renounced his gang past. From death row in San Quentin prison he wrote several books for children warning against the perils of street gangs.

His case was taken up by opponents of the death penalty, prominent Hollywood figures and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. They appealed to Schwarzenegger to spare Williams' life, on the grounds that he had renounced his past and sought to make a positive contribution to young people and society as a whole.

The Republican governor, who had only shortly before appointed a prominent Democrat to be his chief of staff, met with Williams' lawyers and spent several days considering their appeal. But on Monday, shortly after the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco rejected Williams' request for a stay of execution, Schwarzenegger issued a six-page statement turning down clemency and sanctioning the execution.

The governor's decision, driven in large measure by the most cynical political calculations, met with no serious opposition from the Democratic Party leadership in California. With a few half-hearted exceptions, leading Democratic politicians maintained a deathly silence.

In the hours leading up to the execution, every level of the state and federal judiciary declined to intervene: the California state Supreme Court, the US Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, and finally, Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, who rejected the final legal effort by the attorneys acting for Williams.

The killing of Stanley Tookie Williams comes 45 years after the 1960 execution of Caryl Chessman in the same

prison. Chessman had been sentenced to death in 1948 for robbery and kidnapping. While on death row he wrote four books, one of which became a best-seller, and trained himself in law.

His case sparked a powerful movement to spare his life and put an end to the medieval relic of capital punishment. It involved such international figures as Albert Schweitzer, Aldous Huxley and Pablo Casals. Back then, it was argued that the very fact of Chessman spending twelve years on death row was proof of the cruel and inhuman nature of the death penalty.

Chessman went to his death protesting his innocence, but his ordeal fueled a movement against the death penalty that succeeded in achieving its abolition in the US for a number of years.

Now, 45 years after Chessman's execution and nearly 30 years after the restoration of capital punishment in the US, Williams has become the 1,003rd person to be put to death. He was executed after spending nearly a quarter century on California's death row.

Even if one were to assume that Williams was guilty of the terrible crimes for which he was convicted, there is no rational or humane justification for punishing him with 25 years in the shadow of the executioner, culminating in death by lethal injection. All the more so under conditions of growing popular opposition to the death penalty and increasing evidence of false convictions and a judicial system rigged against the poor and minorities.

There are currently 3,415 prisoners on death row across the US, including 54 women. California, with 648 people, including 15 women, has the largest death row population of any state in the union.

California has executed 12 prisoners since the state reinstituted the death penalty in 1977. Schwarzenegger refused clemency to two prisoners prior to Williams. His Democratic predecessor, Gray Davis, presided over five state killings during his nearly five years in office.

The fact that after all this bloodletting, virtually no section of the political establishment came forward to oppose the murder of Williams is a damning indictment of American society and those who administer it.

Schwarzenegger's decision in the Williams case was carried out for the basest of motives—above all, to appease the most right-wing forces in state and national politics.

Less than 12 hours before the scheduled execution, Schwarzenegger's office released its statement justifying the execution. The governor deliberately delayed issuing a final decision, not because he was genuinely in doubt, but in order to reduce the time between the decision and its implementation, and thus block further efforts to spare Williams' life.

The time was also being used to make preparations to mobilize police and elements of the National Guard for use against any violent eruption in the streets of south Los Angeles.

In the end, the governor made a deliberate decision to appease the ultra-right base of the Republican Party, which combines anti-abortion fanaticism (misnamed defense of the "right to life") with fervent support for capital punishment.

Williams remained defiant until the end, rejecting the traditional last meal for a condemned man, saying he did not wish any favors from those who were putting him to death. In an interview last week, he declared, "I don't want food or water or sympathy from the place that is going to kill me. I don't want anyone present for the sick and perverted spectacle. The thought of that is appalling and inhumane. It is disgusting for a human to sit and watch another human die."

The decision to deny clemency was the governor's first major action since his appointment of Democrat Susan Kennedy as his chief of staff, a selection that outraged leading California Republicans. Schwarzenegger chose Kennedy as an olive branch to the Democrats, in the wake of his humiliating failure in last month's special election, when all four of the right-wing referendum propositions he had supported were voted down.

With the execution of Williams, Schwarzenegger is sending a signal to the ultra-right that whatever maneuvers with the Democratic Party may be necessary because it controls the majority in the state legislature, he can still be relied on to push for the realization of their political agenda.

In his statement rejecting clemency, Schwarzenegger made it a condition that the prisoner admit guilt: "Stanley Williams insists he is innocent, and that he will not and should not apologize or otherwise atone for the murders of the four victims in this case... Without an apology and atonement for these senseless and brutal killings there can be no redemption."

Williams has steadfastly denied guilt for the 1979 murders of Albert Owens, Yen-I Yang, Tsai-Shai Chen Yang and Yu-Chin Yang Lin. His lawyers have attacked the evidence used in Williams' 1981 trial, pointing out that it largely consisted

of testimony by witnesses themselves guilty of other murders and hoping to win lighter sentences, and of a jailhouse informer who claimed to have been Williams' confidante although he hardly knew him.

An additional political factor was Schwarzenegger's desire to curry favor with the powerful prison guards union, which vehemently opposed the clemency bid and virtually demanded Williams' execution. In this context, another part of Schwarzenegger's statement rejecting clemency is particularly significant.

The California governor noted that Williams dedicated his 1998 memoir, *Life in Prison*, to "Nelson Mandela, Angela Davis, Malcolm X, Assata Shakur, Geronimo Ji Jaga Pratt, Ramona Africa, John Africa, Leonard Peltier, Dhoruba Al-Mujahid, George Jackson, Mumia Abu-Jamal, and the countless other men, women and youths who have to endure the hellish oppression of living behind bars."

There is nothing incriminating in such a list, naming prominent black nationalists and victims of police violence and frame-up. But Schwarzenegger singled out the mention of George Jackson, the Black Panther and prison activist killed by prison guards in 1971, declaring, "the inclusion of George Jackson on this list defies reason and is a significant indicator that Williams is not reformed and that he still sees violence and lawlessness as a legitimate means to address societal problems."

The reference to George Jackson, accompanied by a long digression in the governor's statement, might appear incomprehensible, referring as it does to an event that took place 34 years ago. But the state murder of Jackson in San Quentin came at the high point of the repression directed by the American government against black nationalists, antiwar activists and all political opponents of US imperialism. The state murder of Stanley Tookie Williams at the same prison is aimed at intimidating a new generation that is coming into struggle against war and repression.



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