

The case of Amber Alvarez: An indictment of conditions in the working class

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Amber Alvarez, a 33-year-old single mother of three children, was arrested last July in Illinois under felony charges of possession and intent to distribute a controlled substance. Her arrest was part of the Aurora Police Department's "Operation Snow," a drug bust operation coordinated with the Illinois State Police North Central Narcotics Task Force and the Kane County Attorney's Office, which culminated in the arrest of 17 other people.

Alvarez had no criminal record prior to her arrest last year.

A veteran, Alvarez entered the US Army at age 17 and served for three years. During that time, like countless thousands of other soldiers, she developed a drinking problem as a result of the stress and conditions of military life. Following her discharge from the Army, she was diagnosed with clinical and postpartum depression, as well as increasing problems with chemical dependency.

Alvarez's three children are currently being cared for by her disabled mother, Cynthia Ralls, who lives alone in subsidized housing.

According to Ralls and family, Alvarez was advised by her defense attorney to plead guilty in order to obtain a reduced sentence. She was not informed of other options open to her, such as seeking assistance from Veterans Affairs and pursuing an appeal for alternative rehabilitation for substance abuse and mental illness rather than face incarceration for a felony crime.

Unlike neighboring counties in Illinois, the Kane County court system does not have a Veteran's Court, which would alternatively hear Alvarez's case with increased consideration of the distinct needs of veterans, which commonly include mental health and substance abuse problems.

Alvarez has until Thursday, April 13, to file an appeal for the opportunity to prove to the court that she did not receive proper legal counsel and a fair trial.

Sentencing Alvarez to prison will only exacerbate her condition rather than offer rehabilitation. The severity of her illness and chemical dependency has already resulted in her inability to complete school and care for her children. She has reportedly made several attempts at suicide.

Substance abuse and mental illness plague thousands of working class youth and adults in America, who enter into branches of the Armed Forces out of a lack of other viable opportunities for employment and income. They face hostile conditions while in service and leave with severe mental health problems. Veterans are turning to substance abuse in record numbers to cope with their experiences.

According to the Army's substance abuse program, the rate of alcohol abuse among service members has doubled over the last five years. The increase lends an insight into the destructive impact that America's ongoing occupations in Iraq and Afghanistan have upon the occupiers themselves. Upon return, veterans also face poor treatment options, the stigma of mental illness cultivated within the military, and limited job and education prospects. Confronted by the worst economic situation in the US since the Great Depression, many veterans also find themselves facing homelessness.

In pursuing the so-called War on Drugs, the American political establishment has expended billions of dollars on policies that have only intensified crime and violence surrounding the drug trade and locked thousands behind the bars of the prison system.

This has brought untold misery upon thousands of poor and working class families, from both the

incarceration of their family members at disproportionate rates for non-violent drug crimes and the profound burden on families such as Alvarez's to care for their most basic needs in conditions of extreme poverty and unemployment.

Additionally, felony records for non-violent drug crimes further prevent thousands from finding employment in the future upon leaving incarceration.

In an online petition started by Alvarez's family for her release into a drug rehabilitation facility, people have expressed their outrage at the treatment of non-violent offenders, and people from all over the US have expressed their support for her diversion to rehabilitative care.

The plight faced by Alvarez and her family is reflective of the broader social crisis in America resulting from more than a decade of war, a deepening economic crisis, and the state closures of mental health services for working class Americans as part of the ongoing austerities imposed by the American ruling class.

Under these conditions, millions of workers increasingly rely on alcohol and street drugs for self-medication or badly needed income. These circumstances are themselves the direct consequences of lacking proper care and treatment for mental health conditions, and a lack of adequate employment to support themselves and their families.

In Illinois, the administration of Democratic governor Pat Quinn has overseen the cutting of billions of dollars from mental health services and the closure of mental health facilities. Furthermore, Quinn has proposed that an additional \$2.7 billion be cut from Medicaid and 24 additional facilities be closed over the next two years across Illinois. The residents of Illinois with the greatest need—the elderly, the disabled, children and working families—will suffer the most as a result.

The brutal attacks, led by the Democratic Party, on the already inadequate mental health services in Illinois, combined with the absence of the legal rights of due process and reasonable policies for rehabilitation and treatment for offenders, are indictments of American capitalism. Alvarez's fate underscores the pressing need for an independent movement of the working class to address these issues. These problems cannot be resolved through appeals to the political forces that oversee the exacerbation of these conditions.



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