

The firing squad returns to America

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On Monday, Utah Governor Gary Herbert signed into law a bill reinstating the firing squad as a method of execution. The bill gives the state government the option of shooting prisoners if it is unable to secure the drugs needed to kill them by lethal injection.

In signing the measure, Herbert, a Republican, acknowledged that firing squads are “a little bit gruesome.” However, he and other state officials argued, it was a practical necessity if the state killing machine was to keep operating.

Other states, likewise driven by a determination to continue executing prisoners, are considering reviving methods most people had long considered relics of a more barbaric past, or employing new means for killing human beings.

The Wyoming state House of Representatives earlier this year passed a bill to bring back the firing squad, but the measure died in the state Senate. The state House in Alabama voted this month to reintroduce the electric chair. Republicans in the Oklahoma state legislature are proposing to put prisoners in sealed chambers and asphyxiate them with nitrogen.

Many states ban the use of nitrogen to euthanize animals, but Oklahoma Republican House member Mike Christian is enthusiastic. “I believe the use of nitrogen hypoxia will be the thing of the future once it’s passed in Oklahoma,” he declared. But then, Christian is not particularly picky when it comes to ways and means of terminating human life.

Last year, following the lethal injection torture of Oklahoma death row inmate Clayton Lockett, during which the condemned man writhed in agony for 45 minutes before succumbing, Christian emphatically reiterated his support for the death penalty: “I really don’t care if it’s by lethal injection, by the electric chair, firing squad, hanging, the guillotine or being fed to the lions.”

Lockett was one of three capital felons who suffered

prolonged agony last year when states—Arizona in the case of Joseph Wood and Ohio in the case of Dennis McGuire—decided to kill them with untested drug combinations provided by poorly regulated and anonymous compounding pharmacies. State governments are finding it increasingly difficult to secure lethal drugs for executions because the European Union has banned their sale to the US by European firms, in line with its official opposition to capital punishment, while major US firms are pulling back from providing the chemicals.

There are also mounting legal challenges to executions using the drugs. The US Supreme Court, which has repeatedly upheld the death penalty, is slated to hear a case next month brought by Oklahoma death row prisoners challenging the state’s lethal injection procedure as a violation of the US Constitution’s ban on “cruel and unusual punishment.”

Some states are rushing to legally bar the identification of companies that supply lethal injection drugs in a bid to keep the death penalty assembly line running. Last year, the Ohio House approved a bill to grant anonymity to such firms for 20 years, and the Georgia Supreme Court ruled that this information could legally be kept secret.

Over 3,000 people languish on America’s death rows, part of the 2.4 million who comprise the world’s biggest national prison population. They are overwhelmingly working class and poor, and disproportionately African American and Latino. Earlier this month, a female death row inmate in Georgia came within hours of death for the second time in a week before being sent back to her cell to await her next rendezvous with the executioner.

Support for state murder is by no means the exclusive province of the Republican Party. Last year, President Obama rushed to defend the death penalty following the “botched” execution of Clayton Lockett,

articulating the overwhelming bipartisan consensus within the American ruling class in support of this barbaric practice.

How is this systematized sadism and violence to be explained? Can we expect to see demands for the return of other practices? What about drawing and quartering, evisceration, garroting?

The revival of the firing squad reveals the real state of class relations in America. It must be considered within the broader context of state sanction for torture, extrajudicial drone assassinations, police killings and the militarization of all facets of social life. It is being carried out by a ruling class that is waging unrelenting war on the working class, including the destruction of pensions and health benefits and the denial of such elements of civilized life as water, gas and electricity.

The seemingly gratuitous savagery of the corporate-financial elite and its political agencies reflects both the bankruptcy of their system—capitalism—and their fear of the growth of working-class opposition.

It is fitting that Utah should revive the firing squad on the centenary of the execution of revolutionary labor activist and songwriter Joe Hill. Born Joel Emmanuel Hägglund in Sweden, Hill immigrated to the US and became an organizer for the Industrial Workers of the World. He was executed by a Utah firing squad on November 19, 1915, after a frame-up murder conviction.

Hill's fate underscores the fact that capital punishment and all of the other forms of state coercion and repression are directed against the working class and its revolutionary potential.

The Marxist truths about the nature of capitalism and the irreconcilable conflict between the two major classes—the capitalist class and the working class—are increasingly emerging in the experience of masses of people: that, for example, the state consists in its essence of special bodies of armed men and, in the words of Engels, “prisons and institutions of coercion of all kinds,” and that the state is “the state of the most powerful, economically dominant class,” a means of “holding down and exploiting the oppressed class.”

The growing struggles of the working class must be imbued with socialist consciousness and a clear revolutionary program. The irreplaceable instrument for carrying out this task is the revolutionary party of the working class. Those workers and youth who oppose

the barbaric reality of capitalism and want to fight for a future free of war, repression and poverty should join the Socialist Equality Party.



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