

New York: Rikers Island prison guards found guilty in beating and cover-up

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Last week, two correctional officers, Christopher Huggins and Michael Dorsainvil, were found guilty in court of the March 2013 beating of inmate Carl Williams inside a holding cell at New York City's prison complex, Rikers Island. The two will be sentenced on December 7, and face up to seven years in prison. Two other officers, Ronald Donnelley and Mark Anglin, were found guilty of falsifying records in a subsequent cover-up of the crime.

The incident occurred when the guards were escorting Williams back to the prison facility from a court appearance. The guards confiscated food that belonged to Williams, and he began to curse at them. As punishment, Huggins and Dorsainvil threw Williams onto the floor of a cell and began punching him. The original indictment against the two also charged Anglin of participating while Donnelley watched from outside the cell. Williams was later treated for multiple cuts and abrasions to his head, and received nine stitches to his mouth.

The officers recorded in a report that Williams had taken a "string-like object" out of a bag, gotten up on a bench, and attempted to hang himself.

The beating, however, was captured on a surveillance video recording and contradicted the claims of the guards.

Rikers Island, with over 9,000 inmates, is the largest correctional facility in the United States and has become notorious as a hellhole for inmates. This is especially the case for the very poorest sections of the working class in New York City, who cannot afford bail and may languish for months or even years in the facility before they go to trial.

Currently there are an estimated 1,400 inmates who have waited over a year for a trial. At least 65 inmates have waited over three years for a trial, the same

number of years as Kalief Browder, who killed himself in 2015 after spending much of that time in solitary confinement, over charges that were eventually dismissed.

Beginning in 2013, an investigative report by the *New York Times* exposed the brutality meted out by guards to juvenile prisoners. The US District Attorney's office reprimanded the institution for its "culture of violence," while media reports detailed the corruption of the contracted health service and the gangsterism of the leadership of the prison guards' union. This string of media exposures has had little impact on conditions at the facility.

Several guards have been convicted of beatings and other crimes. New York City, which owns the Rikers complex, has had to pay out millions of dollars in settlements. These have included \$2.2 million for the death of veteran Jerome Murdough, who was baked to death in an overheated cell in February 2014 and, most recently, \$5.75 million to the family of Bradley Ballard, a mentally ill man who was locked alone in a cell without supervision for six days in September 2013 without access to his medication for schizophrenia and diabetes.

While there have been calls by local prisoner advocates and sections of the political establishment, including New York State Governor Andrew Cuomo and the *New York Times*, to close Rikers Island, the city is unable and unwilling to provide any guarantees that conditions in another facility will be better. The prisons in the New York State system are, in fact, rife with brutality and state torture as well.

Instead, the city's "progressive" Democratic mayor Bill De Blasio has steadfastly resisted these calls while mouthing phrases about "reforming" the prison. According to recent reports, he has given the green

light for construction of an additional 1,489 beds in a new facility on the island that may cost the city as much as a billion dollars. The plan, originally developed under the administration of Michael Bloomberg, was put on hold just weeks after de Blasio assumed office in 2014, but has now been resumed with little fanfare.

The tenor of the reforms that de Blasio has promised is reflected in his decision, announced in September, to begin arming guards with Tasers. The devices can be deadly and used for torturing inmates, but they leave fewer marks on the bodies of victims.



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