

Fair Wayne Bryant, jailed for life for stealing hedge clippers, granted parole by Louisiana Pardon Board

Helen Halyard
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Fair Wayne Bryant, jailed for life in Louisiana's notorious Angola State Penitentiary for stealing a pair of hedge clippers, was granted parole on Thursday, October 16, in a 3-0 vote by the state Parole Board, after being denied on three previous occasions.

Despite being convicted on only one count of simple burglary, Louisiana's harsh habitual offender laws led to a life sentence for Bryant in 1997, because of four prior petty crimes. Such crimes are the product of desperate social conditions. Louisiana has one of the highest poverty rates in the country. Fifty-one percent of the state's population are unable to afford basic necessities, according to a study by United Way. In Caddo Parish, where Bryant grew up, this rate today is 58 percent, and in the city of New Orleans, the poverty rate is 57 percent. Less than half of adults in the state over the age of 16 work at a full-time job.

Known as the "world's prison capital," the state of Louisiana has, by some estimates, the highest per-capita prison population in the world. Roughly 719 out of every 100,000 residents in the state are in prison. A disproportionate number are African American, the poorest and most impoverished section of the population.

Bryant's attorney, Peggy Sullivan, appealed his life sentence to the Second Circuit Court of Louisiana in 2018, stating that her client "contends that his life sentence is unconstitutionally harsh and excessive." However, the state appellate court maintained that the sentence was in accordance with the law and upheld the conviction. This decision was then appealed to the Louisiana Supreme Court.

On August 5 the Supreme Court, with one lone dissenting vote, refused to even hear the case, leaving

Bryant to rot in prison. This provoked national and international outrage demanding the 63-year-old man be set free.

It was following this that a new parole board hearing was granted on a prior appeal in the case.

The proceedings at the parole hearing are instructive and provide insight into the working of the American judicial system. The prisons do not exist to rehabilitate prisoners, but to exploit and brutalize those who wind up in jail in the interests of the profit system. At the parole hearing, Bryant, who had been deprived of his freedom for 24 years for allegedly stealing a pair of hedge clippers, was presented as a "bad" person and the embodiment of evil.

After commenting that he felt Bryant's heart was in the right place, Tony Marabela, a member of the Parole Board Committee, said the following: "You have a poor history of supervision and you have a long history of drug abuse and addiction."

Were it not for the fact that the case has become very well known and the testimony of Robert Lancaster from the Parole and Re-entry Clinic at Louisiana State University, the parole board would have opposed Bryant's release as they have done on other occasions.

Even after Lancaster spoke on Bryant's prison record, Marabella said, "I'm on the fence about this," and then went on to outline a number of conditions for the release. Bryant will have to complete Louisiana Parole Project programming, attend AA meetings and abide by a 9:00 p.m. to 6:00 a.m. curfew.

Granting Bryant parole does not at all mean he is a free man. If he fails to contact the parole officer, misses one of the meetings or is accused of any minor incident by the state, he faces the danger of being locked up

again and serving out the life sentence.

Much of the commentary has presented the case in purely racial terms, pointing out that the lone dissenting voice of opposition in the Louisiana Supreme Court was from Chief Justice Bernette Johnson, who is African American. While racism certainly plays a role, such harsh prison sentences are the product of decades of bipartisan “law-and-order” campaigns, carried out by police officers and politicians of all races. It is white, African American and Hispanic police officers who carry out arrests and often terrorize the poor in working-class communities.

After Hurricane Katrina, when four-fifths of the city of New Orleans was under water, police officers of all colors carried out a brutal reign of terror against impoverished residents trapped in the city. In one of the most notorious incidents, a mass shooting by police officers on the Danziger Bridge, three white and two black officers were eventually charged.

Louisiana is also one of the breeding grounds for the emergence of fascist and extreme-right movements among local sheriffs and police officers. Clay Higgins, congressman for the 3rd district in the state's southwest, gained notoriety as "Cajun John Wayne" while serving as Sheriff for St. Landry Parish for his viral videos threatening to kill criminal suspects. A staunch Trump supporter, Higgins publicly supports the Oath Keepers and other far-right militias, and voted against a resolution in Congress calling for a “peaceful transition of power” after the November presidential elections.



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