

The barbaric reality of American society: Police murder and state executions

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In its prosecution of its war drive against Russia over Ukraine, the American ruling class and its media outlets endlessly proclaim the sanctity of the American “values” of freedom and democracy supposedly being defended abroad.

At home, however, the capitalist oligarchy maintains a barbaric apparatus of repression and violence.

Patrick Lyoya, a 26-year-old African refugee and auto parts worker, was killed in broad daylight on April 4 by a police officer in Grand Rapids, Michigan. His alleged offense was driving with an unregistered license plate, a minor and common situation.

Bystander video, police body camera footage and an independent autopsy confirm that, after a brief scuffle, the officer fired a bullet point blank into the back of Lyoya’s head as he pinned the young man to the ground. Despite this clear evidence, the officer has yet to be publicly identified, arrested or charged.

Lyoya’s father, Peter Lyoya, who had brought his family to the US in 2014 to flee violence in the Congo, was shocked when he heard his son had been killed. “I didn’t believe that ... there’s a genocide in this country,” he said at a press conference last week. “I didn’t know that here in America, there can be execution-style ... to be killed by the police officer.”

Close to 600 people have been killed by police during traffic stops since 2017, according to a recent analysis of data collected by Mapping Police Violence done by the *Guardian*. Traffic stop killings account for approximately 10 percent of the more than 1,000 police murders every year. Among the examples cited by the *Guardian* are a man killed by Miami police after being pulled over for an expired license plate tag and a Milwaukee man killed after he apparently failed to use his blinker.

There have only been four days so far this year on which a police killing has not been reported somewhere in the United States. Employed by the state to defend the

interests of private property and enforce an ever growing gulf of social inequality, the police operate in working class neighborhoods as judge, jury and executioner.

On Thursday night Texas carried out the execution of the oldest man on its death row. Despite popular opposition to the death penalty, the country’s death chambers continue to operate in 27 states.

After more than three decades on death row, Carl Wayne Buntion, 78, was strapped to a gurney and injected with a lethal dose of pentobarbital, a barbiturate which, when administered in a high dose, results in death by respiratory arrest. Opponents of its use compare the effect on the subject to death by drowning or being burned alive. The drug’s sale to US states that have the death penalty has been blocked by its Danish manufacturer.

Oscar Franklin Smith, 72, was set to be executed in Tennessee simultaneously with Buntion but was granted a last minute reprieve by the state’s governor due to “oversight in preparation for lethal injection.” Smith, who was convicted of murdering his estranged wife and her two sons in 1989, had maintained his innocence. His attorneys have been rebuffed in efforts to present DNA evidence that they claim would have exonerated him.

The prison had already served Smith an all-American last meal of a cheeseburger, a slice of apple pie and a dish of vanilla ice cream and he was in the process of receiving his last religious rites when word came down that his life would be spared, at least temporarily.

South Carolina is set to execute Richard Bernard Moore, 57, by firing squad next week after a temporary stay ordered by the state Supreme Court. Moore had been given the “choice” of dying by electric chair or firing squad, electing for the latter. If his killing goes forward as planned, it would mark the first such execution in the United States in over a decade.

And Texas is set to execute Melissa Lucio, 53, in less than a week. She would be the eighteenth woman

executed since the death penalty was reinstated in the US in 1976. The mother of fourteen children was convicted of murder following the death of her two-year-old child in 2007.

Lucio maintains her innocence and that she was coerced into confessing after six hours of intense interrogation by police. Evidence presented by her attorneys corroborates Lucio's insistence that the child was injured after falling down a stairway.

More than 1,500 people have been put to death in the United States over the last 46 years. The majority have been by lethal injection (1,365), followed by electrocution (163), gas chamber (11), hanging (3) and firing squad (3). While the death penalty for juveniles was ended by the Supreme Court in 2005, 22 people have been executed after being convicted of crimes committed when they were under the age of 18.

According to the Death Penalty Information Center, 187 people have been released from death row after being found innocent of the crime of which they were previously convicted. This amounts to an average of nearly four wrongly convicted people being exonerated every year after facing down their deaths at the hands of the state. How many innocent people have been executed to satiate the blood lust of prosecutors, judges and politicians will never be known.

This is the barbaric reality of life in the United States, a society riven by grotesque levels of social inequality and overseen by a capitalist ruling elite which has shown time and again its homicidal indifference and outright hostility to the lives of the working class.

The apparatus of domestic oppression stretches well beyond daily police killings and official state murder.

Approximately two million men and women languish in the nation's sprawling network of prisons and jails, the largest incarcerated population in the world. Ten million people pass through America's jails every year, with many remaining trapped behind bars before they are even convicted of a crime because they cannot afford to pay for their bail.

Meanwhile, thousands of immigrants, many of them never accused of a crime, are locked away in a sprawling network of hundreds of prisons and jails simply because they lack the proper paperwork. These include tens of thousands of children who are subject to isolation and abuse by their guards.

The indifference of the American ruling class to life has been on display throughout the pandemic, with the deadly virus allowed to spread far and wide, killing at least one

million people in the US and 20 million globally. Even as life expectancy has fallen for the first time since World War II, the stock market has hit new highs, fueled by an infusion of bailout money and an orgy of pandemic profiteering.

Backward and antiscientific sentiments have been openly encouraged and promoted at the highest levels of the state. Public health as a field of science dedicated to protecting and educating the public about diseases has been almost completely obliterated as it stands in the way of the accumulation of profits.

This indifference also finds expression in the more than 7,800 people who died while homeless in the US in 2020, meaning that nearly two dozen people died every day on the streets, in their cars, in abandoned buildings or public shelters. Gun violence deaths, another indicator of deep social crisis, approached 45,000 in 2021, including an estimated 24,000 suicides.

The character of the American state is a reflection of the profound social and class tensions in the heart of world capitalism. The United States has the highest levels of inequality of any major capitalist country.

The only progressive way forward for the working class in the fight against war, police violence, state repression and crushing social inequality is in the fight for socialism.

The International Committee of the Fourth International and World Socialist Web Site are hosting the International May Day Online Rally on Sunday May 1 to provide the program for the unification of the working class in the global struggle against the capitalist system, which is the root of social inequality and all its ills.

To register for the International May Day Online Rally, fill out the form below or visit wsws.org/mayday for more information.



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