

Albert Woodfox, “Angola 3” prisoner, dies of COVID-19 six years after his release

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Albert Woodfox, one of the “Angola 3” prisoners, died on August 4 from COVID-19 complications at the age of 75. Workers and youth internationally familiar with his case were justifiably outraged by the treatment he suffered over most of his life.

Woodfox’s life and death epitomize the brutality of American capitalism and the methods it uses to suppress the working class. For nearly 44 years he was held in solitary confinement, for most of that time at the Louisiana State Penitentiary.

The details of his trial and decades-long imprisonment underscore the anti-democratic character of the United States’ “justice” system, defended by both the Democratic and Republican parties, and belie any claims that the US government defends democracy and human rights abroad. That he was needlessly killed by COVID-19 is no less an indictment of the capitalist system which has subordinated public health and human life to private profit throughout the pandemic.

As the center of capitalist reaction, the US has both the highest total prison population and the highest per capita prison population rate in the world. Over 2 million people are incarcerated in thousands of prisons, jails, immigration detention facilities, juvenile centers and more. As of 2011, at least 80,000 people were being held in solitary confinement, a figure which has no doubt grown. Every year, American police murder over 1,000 people in the streets. While African Americans and other minorities are disproportionately affected, such repression and terror is directed against the entire working class and is used by the capitalist class to enforce its rule.

Alongside the methods of violent repression are the economic and social conditions that bear down on the working class and its youth, including mass unemployment, substandard education and poor working conditions. It is within this context that Woodfox was first incarcerated in 1969 for petty crimes committed as a teenager. From there, he was in and out of prison until being sentenced to 50 years for armed robbery in 1971.

Throughout this time the United States was wracked with political crisis, including widespread opposition to the war in Vietnam. The period saw the assassination of Malcolm X in 1965 and civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968; the

FBI’s illegal COINTELPRO project targeting left-wing groups; and the National Guard’s massacre of students at Kent State University in 1970. The working class carried out a series of major strikes throughout the decade of the 1970s including among postal workers, autoworkers and miners.

While in prison at Louisiana State Penitentiary, Woodfox and fellow prisoner Herman Wallace were convicted for the murder of prison guard Brent Miller in 1972. Though the case against them rested entirely on dubious witness testimony and no forensic evidence, Woodfox was tried and convicted within weeks by an all-white jury and placed into solitary confinement. Wallace was convicted a year later. A third prisoner, Robert King, wrongfully convicted of killing a fellow inmate, was also placed in indefinite solitary.

Together they became known as the “Angola 3” and collectively spent over 100 years in solitary confinement. The Louisiana State Penitentiary, colloquially known as Angola, is built upon a former plantation whose name was derived from the place of origin of most of the slave labor.

For over four decades, Woodfox spent 23 hours per day in a 6 by 9 foot cell, with a view through his cell bars of a concrete corridor. Throughout the years he endured beatings, tear gassings, the torture of prolonged isolation and grossly inadequate medical care. He was only allowed out of his cell for a single hour a few times per week to shower and to walk alone in the corridor or in an outdoor yard.

A 2011 report by Amnesty International noted that his access to reading materials and television was restricted, that he was deprived of mental stimulation such as work or educational programs and that he was granted only limited visits from family and friends. When his mother died in 1994, prison officials punitively refused to allow him to attend her funeral.

His lawyers reported that due to or exacerbated by the prolonged confinement, he suffered “claustrophobia, hypertension, heart disease, chronic renal insufficiency, diabetes, anxiety and insomnia.”

It was evident from the beginning that the Angola 3 were targeted and retaliated against because of their political beliefs, their affiliation with the Black Panther Party and their organizing efforts inside the prison against its brutal conditions.

Woodfox’s 1972 conviction was twice overturned on

multiple grounds including misconduct by the prosecution, racial discrimination, inadequate defense and suppression of exculpatory evidence. It was later revealed that the state's primary witness was bribed for his testimony and a bloody fingerprint at the crime scene matched neither Woodfox nor Wallace. Nevertheless, the state of Louisiana ruthlessly fought against his release.

Angola Prison Warden Burl Cain admitted during a deposition in 2008 that even if he believed Woodfox were not guilty of Miller's murder, "I would still keep him in [solitary], I still know that he is still trying to practice Black Pantherism, and I still would not want him walking around my prison because he would organize the young new inmates. I would have me all kind of problems..."

While Marxists have fundamental differences with the politics of the Black Panther Party, a brand of petty-bourgeois radicalism and black nationalism, Woodfox's political involvement with them nevertheless provided him with an elementary understanding of the social and economic system that was responsible for his incarceration. This understanding, however limited, was a critical factor in his ability to survive and continue to struggle against the injustices done to him, including by educating himself about history and the law.

The camaraderie developed between him, Wallace and King also played a major role in their ability to endure the horrific conditions of their isolation. The men would call to each other from their cells and became "our own means of inspiration to one another," as he wrote in his autobiography. Finally, the international support they received, including by Amnesty International, artists, filmmakers and regular people who learned of their case, also encouraged them to continue to appeal their imprisonment. After learning the details of their convictions, Teenie Verret, the widow of the prison guard who was murdered, believed they were innocent and called for their release.

King was released in 2001 after a court overturned his conviction. Wallace was released in 2013 on humanitarian grounds and died three days later of liver cancer. Finally in 2016, Woodfox was released after reaching a plea deal on the lesser charge of manslaughter, though he maintained that he was innocent and only pleaded "no contest."

The plight of the Angola 3 has many similarities to that of Gary Tyler, another former Angola prisoner. As a teenager, Tyler was framed for the murder of a white youth. Similar to Woodfox's case, Tyler's conviction rested solely on testimony provided by students who were coerced and threatened by police. The Workers League, forerunner to the Socialist Equality Party, played a leading role in waging an international campaign to rally the working class in his defense, insisting that his frame-up represented an attack on the entire working class. He spent forty years in prison, two of which were spent on death row, and was only released after Supreme Court rulings in separate cases made it impossible for Louisiana to continue

his incarceration. Woodfox devotes a chapter of his autobiography, *Solitary*, to Tyler.

Albert Woodfox's unjust conviction, his imprisonment and isolation for nearly all of his adult life, and his death after contracting a virus that the US government has allowed to spread uncontrolled for two-and-a-half years, are an expression of the deeply anti-democratic character of American capitalism and the violent class relations that underlie it. At the same time, his ability to endure and defy his imprisonment is a powerful testament to human resilience.

Over the past 50 years, class antagonisms have only grown sharper with the mounting crisis of capitalist society. The ruling class in every country is ever more openly declaring war on all democratic rights and on living standards as a means to suppress the working class. In the US, this has taken unprecedented form in the last two years including the fascistic coup attempt of January 6, 2021, and its ongoing cover-up by the Democratic Party; the series of ultra-reactionary rulings by the US Supreme Court including the overturning of the right to an abortion; the runaway inflation that has brought millions of workers to the brink of hunger and impoverishment; and the reckless war drive against Russia and China that threatens nuclear annihilation.

The defense of democratic rights, dismantling the vast prison system and advancing the interests of the working class are inextricable from the fight for socialism. The working class is faced with the choice of unending disease, poverty and barbarism—or waging a revolutionary struggle for socialism on a global scale. Once it becomes conscious of this task and harnesses its strength on an international scale, the working class will abolish all forms of oppression and, on that basis, achieve genuine justice for Albert Woodfox.



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