

Sullivan Walter, incarcerated for 36 years, exonerated in Louisiana

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On August 25, Sullivan Walter was released from prison after being incarcerated for 36 years at Elayn Hunt Correctional Center in St. Gabriel, Louisiana. Sentenced in June 1986 at the age of 17 for a crime he did not commit, Walter's sentence, according to the University of Michigan Law School's National Registry of Exonerations, is the fifth longest wrongful incarceration of a juvenile in US history, and the longest in the state of Louisiana.

In May 1986, a home invasion occurred in the Lower Garden District area of New Orleans where a woman was raped. According to Innocence Project New Orleans (IPNO) and the Orleans Parish District Attorney's Office's motion to have Walter exonerated, "All the times that she [the victim] could observe him [the perpetrator] was either masked, in an unlit room at night, and/or threatening her not to look at him."

Six weeks later, Walter was arrested for an unrelated burglary. The victim's description of the perpetrator, which included a blue cap, was similar to the one Walter wore when he was arrested and he was identified as the suspect.

According to IPNO's client profile on Walter: "Serological testing conducted in the 1980s on seminal fluids recovered from the victim showed that Mr. Walter was not the perpetrator, but the jury that convicted Mr. Walter did not learn of this and it has never before been fully presented to a court."

Despite this and other failures on the part of his defense team, Walter's trial, according to IPNO, "lasted just a single day, including jury selection and three-and-a-half hours of deliberation," and he was found guilty of the crime. He was prosecuted as an adult and imprisoned in June 1986. In October 2021, IPNO began investigating Walter's case, and on August 25 he became the 42nd person exonerated by the nonprofit organization.

Walter's story shares many common features with other

wrongfully imprisoned individuals that organizations such as IPNO have helped free. His case is emblematic of the historically corrupt and class-based criminal justice system in the US in general and the state of Louisiana in particular.

Similar cases include that of Gary Tyler, imprisoned in the notorious Louisiana State Penitentiary in 1974 at the age of 16 for a crime he did not commit, and released in April 2016 after 41 years behind bars. Alfred Woodfox, one of the "Angola 3" prisoners who recently died from COVID-19 at the age of 75, spent 44 years in solitary confinement after being wrongfully convicted for the murder of a prison guard in 1972. He was released in February 2016.

Walter's conviction took place during the 30-year period (1973-2003) that Harry Connick Sr., a Democrat, was New Orleans District Attorney. According to IPNO's national organization, "36 men convicted in Orleans Parish during Connick's 30-year tenure as DA have made allegations of prosecutorial misconduct, and 19 have had their sentences overturned or reduced as a result." This includes Shareef Cousin, who was one of the youngest convicts ever condemned to death row in the US, and John Thompson of the *Connick v. Thompson* case.

However, flagrant abuses, criminal misconduct and a general evisceration of democratic rights for citizens and noncitizens alike have been the modus operandi for both Democratic and Republican administrations since the demise of Lyndon B. Johnson's "Great Society" programs and the response of the ruling class to the politically explosive period of 1968-1975.

The track record of President Joe Biden provides an example. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, as either the ranking Democrat on the Senate Judiciary Committee under arch-reactionary and segregationist Strom Thurmond or as the chairperson himself, he oversaw the

passage of law-and-order legislation that resulted in longer jail terms for millions of people, such as the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994.

The Clinton administration signed the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) in September 1996. In conjunction with the creation of the Department of Homeland Security—the department overseeing the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Customs and Border Protection (CBP) agencies—under George W. Bush following the September 11 terror attacks, paved the way for the mass deportations during the Obama years that branded that president as the “deporter-in-chief.”

As a part of Washington’s decades-long “war on terror,” the second Bush administration oversaw the opening of the infamous Guantanamo Bay detention camp in Cuba, where detainees have suffered torture of the most ghastly kind.

These are but a few of countless examples verifying Vladimir Lenin’s analysis of the state in his famous work, *The State and Revolution*, written shortly before the Bolshevik Revolution in October 1917. In that work, reviewing the writings of Friedrich Engels on the origins and development of the state, Lenin wrote that state power “consists of special bodies of armed men having prisons, etc., at their command.”

To protect the state from rebellion and takeover by the working class, the ruling capitalist class employs many repressive mechanisms to buttress its material and social privileges. This includes the judiciary, the police and the intelligence and military apparatuses.

These are the forces behind the prosecution, imprisonment and torture of whistleblowers like Julian Assange, Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden who have defended the public’s right to be informed of the imperialist crimes of Washington abroad and its anti-democratic violations at home.

This class relationship underlines Sullivan Walter’s reaction to his prosecution in 1986, when he commented in retrospect, “I felt like I was going up against a giant. There was nothing I could do.”

Walter’s case and the capitalist state’s laundry list of abuses fly in the face of Washington’s worn-out claims to being a global defender of democracy and “human rights.” Writing on the death of Albert Woodfox, the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote:

“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.”

This reaction has metastasized throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. While deliberately carrying out profit-driven and anti-scientific measures that have led to the preventable deaths of over 1 million people from the virus, both the Trump and Biden administrations have greenlit the funneling of trillions of dollars into the coffers of Wall Street, the big banks and corporations.

Professing that there is no money to solve any of society’s problems, including crumbling health care and education infrastructure, poverty, unemployment, and “deaths of despair,” the political representatives of the ruling elite continually manage to find all the funds necessary to wage imperialist wars and militarist provocations against Moscow and Beijing that threaten humanity with a nuclear third world war.

This is the objective backdrop against which violations of basic democratic rights have taken place against Sullivan Walter and many others like him around the world. But these rapidly deteriorating conditions are also the underlying factors contributing to an enormous upsurge of the class struggle. The defense of democratic rights, abolishing the vast prison system, and placing the needs of society before the private interests of capitalist exploiters is inextricably connected to the struggle of the international working class for socialism.



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