Gary Tyler, then and now: From class war prisoner to artist

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During the 1970s and 1980s, hundreds of thousands of people in the US and internationally rallied in support of Gary Tyler. In 1974, as a 16-year-old high school student in Destrehan, Louisiana, some 20 miles from New Orleans, Tyler was falsely charged with the murder of a white youth in the midst of racial tensions over court-ordered desegregation of public schools.

Tyler spent almost his entire adult life—nearly 42 years—in the notorious Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola for a crime he did not commit. Since his release in 2016, at the age of 57, Tyler has become a mentor to homeless youth and an artist specializing in the use of appliqué patterned quilts and textiles. He learned the technique of appliqué patterning in prison.

Although he is using a different medium to present his message, he has remained as principled in the defense of democratic rights as ever. In addition to his artwork, Tyler has been speaking throughout the country, using his experiences to oppose government injustices.

On Saturday, July 8, Tyler's first solo exhibit will be held at an event in Detroit sponsored by the Library Street Collective. The exhibit, titled "We are the Willing," is taken from the opening lines of the motto of the Angola Prison Drama Club, which Tyler headed as president for 28 years.

He states on the website art matters:

> My art practice was born of injustice… While in prison, I learned the arts of theater and quilt-making, and used my talents to enrich my life and to mentor countless fellow-prisoners. Though my art was born of injustice, it generated hope. I served as a volunteer in the prison hospice program for many years, comforting the dying. I taught myself the art of quilting to support the program financially & to comfort patients and their families. The Angola Prison drama program, which I directed for 30 years, was a very robust program. In my work with prisoners, I used drama to promote a culture of community, civic responsibility, and hope. Since my release, I use both quilting & drama in my work with homeless youth.

Recounting his experiences at Angola prison when he was first sent there in 1976 as a death row prisoner, Tyler recently described to an audience at St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Santa Maria, California the conditions he encountered:

"I was in prison after being there less than 48 hours, in cell 8, on a bunk, and I was thinking, 'How am I going to survive this in my life?' when suddenly I heard a scream."

He said the scream was so loud he thought it was nearby. He looked through the bars of his cell and witnessed the burning of an inmate on a different tier who had been doused with gasoline and set on fire.

"That told me that the bars don't protect me," said Tyler. He realized that the entire prison system, including the guards, were crooked. "Here I was. I was a little guy in the midst of guys built like gladiators, who were built for war, people who could tear me apart."

Tyler said he was afraid for his life, but it turned out there were several inmates who protected him. "Those men that I was afraid of, they were my protectors. They gave me the best of themselves," he said. It was a human side of the inmates, many charged with horrendous murders, that had a searing impact on Tyler.

"They saw this little kid," he said. "Who did this kid remind them of? I not only reminded them of themselves, but of their (own) sons that they left behind. Or their little brother they left behind, or their neighbor's child."

Tyler recalled this theme in relation to his experiences with the Angola Prison Drama Club. He said of the prisoners he directed and helped to mentor, "They gave the best of themselves."

Tyler has explained that in telling his story he wants to show how people overcome "odds and challenges"—an admirable ambition.

The Workers League and the Young Socialists, the forerunners of the Socialist Equality Party and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, played a leading role in the campaign for Tyler's freedom. In collaboration with Gary, our movement carried out a determined struggle to mobilize the working class in his defense, insisting that his frame-up was not only a vicious racist attack by the likes of the White Citizens Council, but more fundamentally a class question. The fight for Gary's freedom was not limited to the US, but was conducted by our international movement, the International Committee of the Fourth International.

We insisted that the frame-up of Gary Tyler represented an attack on the rights of the whole working class, and warned that the deepening turn by the US ruling class to domestic repression would affect every section of the working class. It was part of the response of the corporate-financial elite and its two-party system to an escalating economic, social and political crisis of the capitalist system internationally, which saw the fall of governments from Britain to Greece, Portugal and Spain, and the collapse of the Nixon administration in the US. This took place amidst a rise of militant working class struggles and a political radicalization driven by the breakdown of the post-World War II economic boom. Internationally, the military defeat of US imperialism in Vietnam delivered a body blow to the stability of US capitalism at home.

In the US, there were 5,716 strikes in 1970 involving over three million workers. Many of the strikes in the auto plants and the coal mines were wildcat strikes initiated from below and led by young workers.

The warning that we made in relation to the frame-up of Gary Tyler has been entirely borne out. On average, three people a day, averaging more than 1,000 people a year, are killed by police in the US. A study by *Lancet* showed that a minimum of 30,800 people were killed by the police between 1980 and 2019.

While these killings have been depicted as motivated purely by racism, a

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statistical study conducted by the *World Socialist Web Site*, Behind the epidemic of police killings in America: Class, poverty and race, revealed that those killed by police are overwhelmingly working class, with more police killings of whites than blacks, although a disproportionate percentage of blacks are killed. These attacks have been growing against all sections of the working class, in lockstep with the terrible increase in social inequality.

Today a new generation, already angered over the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Tyre Nichols, Jordan Neely and so many more, is becoming aware of the important case of Gary Tyler and the campaign for his freedom.

Gary Tyler's arrest and conviction

On October 7, 1974, Tyler was on a school bus involved in an effort to integrate previously all-white Destrehan High School. David Duke, an emerging political figure in Louisiana and the national Ku Klux Klan (later a prominent supporter of Donald Trump), together with the local White Citizens Council, had whipped up racial hatreds in response to the desegregation order.

As Gary's bus attempted to leave the school, the crowd, primarily white students, began throwing rocks and bottles at the bus. The police looked on. During the melee, a shot rang out from the crowd aimed toward the bus. The bullet killed a 13-year-old white student, Timothy Webber, who was in the crowd near the bus.

The driver, Ernest Cojoe, told the police that the shot came from outside the bus (he worked part-time for the police department). Nevertheless, the police claimed the opposite—that the shot came from inside the bus. The police searched the bus and the students twice, but no weapon was found. After the third search, the police brought out a seat cushion, claiming that a gun had been found inside of it. The weapon turned out to be a police firing-range practice gun. Later, this fake "evidence" went missing. The police also claimed there were no fingerprints.

Gary was severely beaten by the police. When he refused to confess, he was charged with first-degree murder. The police managed to "find" a witness to testify against Gary. This witness, recalling the infamous Scottsboro Boys frame-up of the 1930s, recanted her testimony in a 31-page affidavit in March 1976. The witness, Natalie Blanks, a student on the bus along with Gary, explained that she had been threatened by the police and told that unless she read the statement prepared for her she would be charged as an accessory to the crime.

The next legal travesty was the conspiracy between the police, the prosecutor and the judge, who worked together to postpone Gary's trial until he turned 17 for the express purpose of trying him as an adult.

The trial, held in 1975, was a sham. The judge, Ruche Marino, was reportedly himself a member of the White Citizens Council. An all-white, hand-picked jury was chosen to make sure there was a conviction. Gary's lawyer, Jack Williams, was incompetent. He had never tried a murder case and failed to challenge the gross negligence of the judge.

The trial lasted nine days. The jury deliberated for only three hours before it came back with a guilty verdict. Under Louisiana law at the time, a capital crime automatically incurred the death sentence. The judge ordered Gary to be executed on May 1, 1976.

In 1976, Gary's new lawyer, Jack Peoples, assisted by law students from Tulane University in New Orleans, challenged the conviction based on the recantation of Blanks' testimony. On July 2, 1976, the US Supreme Court ruled in *Roberts v. Louisiana* that Louisiana's death penalty was unconstitutional. The court ordered the Louisiana Supreme Court to review all death row cases in the state and commute their sentences to life imprisonment without parole for at least 20 years. As a result, after two years on death row, Tyler was resentenced to life and removed from solitary confinement to the general population.

In 1989, after Tyler had spent 15 years in prison, the Louisiana Board of Appeals recommended a pardon based on his behavior as a model prisoner. To be released, however, he would have to get the approval of the governor, Democrat Buddy Roemer, who later became a Republican. That year Roemer was running for governor against David Duke, who was trying to downplay his KKK resume. Roemer refused to even consider the pardon.

Successive Democratic and Republican governors rejected appeals for pardons, including Democratic Governor Kathleen Blanco. *New York Times* columnist Bob Herbert wrote three probing articles on Gary Tyler in 2007 in the hope that Blanco would grant Tyler a pardon before she left office in 2009. She refused.

Finally, in 2016, the state of Louisiana was forced to release Tyler after a series of court rulings left it with no other choice. Tyler's lawyer filed a motion on the basis of the 2012 US Supreme Court ruling *Miller v. Alabama*, which found that mandatory life sentences without the possibility of parole for juvenile offenders violated the US Constitution. A January 2016 ruling, *Montgomery v. Louisiana*, determined that *Miller* had to be applied retroactively.

Exacting the final pound of flesh, the state of Louisiana insisted that in exchange for his freedom, Tyler had to accept a guilty plea for manslaughter. Tyler adamantly, and courageously, has always maintained his innocence. However, to win his release after more than 40 years of imprisonment, he was forced to accept the plea. The judge then reduced his sentence to 21 years, less than half the time he had already served, allowing his release.

The campaign for Gary's freedom

A central theme of the fight of the Young Socialists and the Workers League was that the attack on Gary Tyler was an attack on the entire working class, black and white, and that his freedom would come only through the mobilization of the independent strength of the working class against both the Democrats and Republicans, and the system of capitalist exploitation they upheld.

On that basis, our movement won enormous support for Tyler. We issued a pamphlet, *The Frameup of Gary Tyler*, which sold tens of thousands of copies and went through three reprintings. We collected over 100,000 signatures on petitions demanding the dropping of all charges and his immediate release.

The pamphlet issued by the Young Socialists stated:

> The Young Socialists is fighting to mobilize the support of thousands of workers and youth to free Gary Tyler. We warn that Gary's life cannot be defended through protests or appeals to the government and its courts. Those forces framed him up as a necessary step in their preparations for the most brutal assault on the rights of the entire working class. Defending Gary means fighting to force out this government headed by Carter or Ford and smashing the capitalist system which is responsible for these attacks.

In 1976, the Young Socialists and the Workers League won the endorsement of the campaign to free Tyler from unions representing

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millions of workers, as well as the endorsements of student and civic organizations and musicians. These included:

• Local 10, International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), San Francisco

• Local 6, Pressmen's Union, representing striking *Washington Post* pressmen

• Local 214, National Union of Letter Carriers, San Francisco

• State Executive Board, SEIU Local 535, Los Angeles

• Joseph Davis, president, United Auto Workers Local 3 at Dodge Main in Detroit

• Chester B. Wray, president, United Auto Workers Local 216, Los Angeles

At that time, the Workers League and the Young Socialists were raising the demand for the unions to break from the Democratic Party and establish a labor party based on a socialist program, as the means of posing the fight for the political independence of the working class. The unions had not yet been transformed by the pro-capitalist bureaucracies into corporatist agencies of the government and big business, and our movement coupled the call for a labor party with the demand for a Congress of Labor and a rank-and-file rebellion to force out the bureaucrats and establish a revolutionary leadership of the union organizations.

Two of the popular musicians who supported and wrote songs about Gary Tyler were the British pop and reggae band UB40 and Gil Scott-Heron, formerly with the Last Poets.

On May 15-16, 1976, Gary's mother, Juanita Tyler, and his brother Terry addressed a Young Socialists National Conference in Detroit attended by over 400 delegates. They were greeted with standing ovations.

On December 4, 1976, the Workers League and the Young Socialists held a spirited demonstration of over 300 workers and youth in Harlem that galvanized the support of thousands of workers and young people who signed petitions and donated funds. At the event, young people staged a play about Gary and musicians performed. Terry Tyler addressed the rally and Gary sent revolutionary greetings.

At the forefront of the march was Tom Henehan, a member of the Workers League Political Committee and leading member of the Young Socialists, who played a major role in the campaign for Gary Tyler's freedom. Tom was assassinated in 1977 at a Young Socialists event in Brooklyn, New York held to promote the fight for Gary's freedom.

In 1985, then-Young Socialists National Secretary D'Artagnan Collier interviewed Gary at Angola penitentiary. (The interview is published in the pamphlet *Gary Tyler, a Class War Prisoner Speaks*). Gary spoke with enormous respect and emotion about Tom:

> This was a fighter, a fighter who died for what he believed in. We should always keep in mind that Tom Henehan's spirit lives within us and that we should use that as a guiding force… Tom is a brother whom we should always have in our hearts because Tom made a hell of an impression on me.

Lessons of the campaign to free Gary Tyler: Which way forward?

The Young Socialists' slogan, "It could be you; it could be me. Labor must set Gary Tyler Free!," was widely embraced by young people and workers. It proved not only correct, but far-sighted. Many black youth such as Gary Tyler were among the initial victims of government attacks, but the target was the working class as a whole, black, white and immigrant. And the attacks were carried out by both the Democrats and the Republicans.

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, the ruling elite had well and truly discarded reformist programs such as the "War on Poverty" and turned to austerity. Reagan's election marked an inflection point in the intensification of the war on the working class and the collapse of the trade unions. This was summed up by the government's smashing of the PATCO air traffic controllers' union in 1981, made possible by scabbing on the part of the AFL-CIO bureaucracy.

It was during the Democratic administration of Bill Clinton that the prison population exploded. Clinton's "tough on crime" bill in 1994, supported by then-Senator Joe Biden, encouraged states to pass laws that increased sentencing and encouraged the use of the death penalty. From 1980 to 1990, there was a 134 percent increase in the prison population. From 1980 to 2020, the prison population increased 300 percent, from 500,000 in 1980 to over two million today.

Running for reelection as president, Bill Clinton interrupted his New Hampshire primary campaign in February 1993 to fly to Arkansas and attend the execution of Ricky Ray Rector. This was done to put an exclamation mark over his support for the death penalty.

Throughout the fight to free Gary Tyler, the Young Socialists and the Workers League insisted that racism was a product of capitalism and could not be overcome without destroying its source, the profit system. This meant opposing all forms of nationalist politics and politics based on race, gender or other forms of identity, and fighting to unite the working class both within the US and internationally.

The organizations of the middle-class pseudo-left continuously sought to present the question of Tyler's defense, to the extent that they concerned themselves with it, as solely a question of race. In May 1976, the Young Socialists introduced a resolution at a conference called by the National Student Coalition Against Racism (SCAR), an organization run by the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and the Young Socialist Alliance (YSA). The resolution was a principled defense of democratic rights that opposed the ruling class' promotion of racism as a tool to divide the working class.

The resolution stated:

> This conference declares that the attempt of the state of Louisiana to railroad Gary Tyler into the electric chair is a blow aimed against the entire working class. This vicious frame-up is part and parcel of the conspiracy by the ruling class politicians of the Democratic and Republican parties to destroy the basic democratic rights of all workers…We pledge to mobilize the youth and workers in every section of the labor movement to force the release of Gary Tyler and to defend all democratic rights.

The SWP and YSA voted against the resolution. All of the revisionists and Stalinists who at one time or another claimed to support Gary Tyler were oriented to the Democratic Party. These groups paraded various black nationalists at their rallies who were looking for careers and connections.

As the WSWS stated in January in "The class issues in the police killing of Tyre Nichols":

> As Lenin explained in *State and Revolution*, paraphrasing Engels, the police are one of the "special bodies of armed men" of the capitalist state. They exist to repress the resistance of the working class, with whatever violence is needed, to defend the property and wealth of the ruling oligarchy.
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> In a society so catastrophically unequal as the United States, it is impossible to rule without the savagery of police violence, which

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will increasingly be turned against striking workers.

Today, a social and political crisis is developing in the US and internationally on a far higher scale than in the 1970s, bound up with the proxy war in Ukraine of US imperialism and its NATO allies against Russia and the preparations for military conflict against China. The turn to world war abroad means brutal austerity and dictatorship at home.

Masses of workers and young people are being radicalized in opposition to the attacks on democratic rights, the growth of inequality, the impoverishment of the working class, and war. Sections of the ruling elite are turning openly to fascism.

The way forward is the mobilization of the tremendous power of the working class independently of both big business parties on the basis of a socialist program. Gary Tyler's case resonates because the working class is looking for a way to fight and a new generation of young people is becoming radicalized and turning to socialism. The task at hand is to build the revolutionary leadership—the Socialist Equality Party and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality—required to lead this struggle.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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