

The state murder of Marcellus Williams and the fight to abolish the death penalty

Niles Niemuth
25 September 2024

*I am in blood
Stepped in so far, that, should I wade no more
Returning were as tedious as go o'er*

Macbeth, Act III Scene 4

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On Tuesday evening, in its death chamber behind closed doors, the state of Missouri murdered Marcellus “Khaliifah” Williams with an injection of lethal toxins.

The pleas of more than 1 million petition signers for clemency, the outrage of millions more around the world, and clear evidence that he had been wrongfully convicted could not hold back the hands of cold capitalist justice.

Six black-robed fascists on the Supreme Court gave their assent to this crime, rejecting two last minute appeals. And through its silence, the Biden-Harris administration endorsed Williams’ killing. Vice President Kamala Harris defended the death penalty in court when she was attorney general of California. As it nominated Harris to be its candidate for president last month, the Democratic Party struck nominal opposition to the death penalty from its campaign platform.

There is no doubt that Williams was innocent of the 1998 murder of St. Louis reporter Felicia Gayle. None of the physical evidence—bloody fingerprints, footprints and hairs—tied him to the crime scene. Rather, he was implicated by a former cellmate and an ex-girlfriend who were seeking a \$10,000 reward for information leading to a conviction. The jury in his trial never heard evidence that Gayle’s laptop, found in the trunk of his car, was likely planted by the former girlfriend.

Williams maintained his innocence up to his death. His execution was opposed by Gayle’s family, jurors who originally sentenced him to death and the prosecutor’s office which convicted him and had sought to undo the conviction.

The United States is among the handful of countries which still routinely carries out executions, joining the ignominious company of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iran and China. So far this year, 16 men have been put to death in eight states. Nine more executions are scheduled for this year, including three over the next week.

Since the death penalty was reinstated in 1976 by the Supreme Court, 1,598 people have been executed. As of July 1, 2024 there were 2,213 people on death row, including in federal prison and military detention. Those sentenced to die often languish for decades waiting for their final moments at the hands of the executioners or a last-minute reprieve.

It is certain that Williams is not the only innocent person to have been executed. There have been 200 death row exonerations since 1973, or an average of four people each year who have been found to have been wrongfully convicted. Among the most brazen cases of innocents railroaded into prison and wrongfully sentenced to death is Gary Tyler, who was finally released in 2016 after nearly 41 years behind bars.

Nearly five million Americans are under some form of judicial supervision, of which two million are languishing in a barbaric network of prisons and jails. Prisoners are subjected to inhumane conditions and abuse, leading to more than 6,000 prisoner deaths in 2020. Children are regularly charged as adults and sentenced to life in prison without parole. And outside the prison walls, police roam the street as an occupying force, killing more than 1,000 people every year and abusing thousands more without any consequences.

After every mass shooting at a school, place of worship or grocery store, President Biden and others routinely intone that there is “no place for violence in America.” What he means is that the American state

and the ruling class intend to maintain a monopoly on violence aimed at suppressing opposition from the working class—from its genocide in Gaza to the death chambers.

Socialist Equality Party presidential candidate Joseph Kishore noted in response to the execution of Marcellus Williams:

The barbarism of capital punishment reveals the true nature of the American political system. It is a system built on violence, repression and the denial of basic democratic rights. The state's power to execute its own citizens, often without conclusive evidence or a fair trial, reflects the broader violence of American imperialism, which has killed millions in its pursuit of global hegemony.

The continued existence of the death penalty in the United States is yet another confirmation of the criminality and violence of the capitalist political and economic system, which oozes filth out of every pore.

Trump and the Republicans are building up a fascist movement, focused on a vicious attack on immigrants and refugees. The Democrats are incapable of and opposed to addressing the interests of the broad mass of the population, and are drenched in blood from an escalating global war.

Violence in pursuit of American imperialist interests abroad through war and genocide inevitably finds its expression in the character of class relations within the country.

Polish-German revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg noted more than a century ago in calling for the abolition of capital punishment:

The existing disciplinary system, which is impregnated with brutal class spirit and with capitalist barbarism, should be radically altered. But a complete reform, in harmony with the spirit of socialism, can be based only on a new economic and social order; for both crime and punishment have, in the last analysis, their roots deep in the organization of society.

The fight to abolish the death penalty, to put an end to police killings and to end genocide and war requires a fight against the capitalist system in which this violence is rooted.



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