

Week of executions in America ends with a nitrogen gas asphyxiation in Alabama

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Five death row inmates were put to death in the US over the past week, a pace unprecedented since July 2003. These executions demonstrate the myriad ways in which this barbaric practice is meted out, whether through disregard of a signed affidavit that the condemned “was not present” at the crime, execution of a man whose childhood was plagued by poverty and abuse, the killing of an innocent man, an execution despite the recommendation of clemency by the pardon board, or by the utilization of a new torturous method.

There is no “humane” way to carry out a state killing. As the *World Socialist Web Site* recently wrote:

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.

Alan Eugene Miller had an extensive family history of mental illness and court records say that his father’s drug use led to physical and psychological abuse. Barbara Miller, his mother, spoke of the family’s poverty, describing the family’s various homes as “junky, rat-infested, roach-infested, just falling in.”

During Miller’s sentencing hearing a forensic psychiatrist testified that Miller was “mentally ill” at the time of the murders, but that his condition did not meet the level of mania necessary to establish an insanity defense in Alabama.

Miller survived a previous execution attempt by lethal injection in September 2023. Prison officials abandoned the execution when Miller’s veins couldn’t be accessed within 30 minutes of his death warrant’s expiration. Miller claimed in a lawsuit that prison workers poked him for 90 minutes trying to start an IV. The attempt to execute Miller came two months after Alabama spent three hours executing another death row prisoner, Joe Nathan James, mangling his body in the process.

Miller’s execution by gassing took place at the William C. Holman Correctional facility in Atmore. According to AL.com, after the curtains opened to the witness viewing room at 6 p.m. [Central Time] and the warden read the death warrant, Miller stated, “I didn’t do anything to be on death row,” before a prison officer checked the seal of the gas mask fitted to Miller’s face and shut the mask valve that had been opened to allow him to speak.

AL.com wrote:

The gas appeared to start flowing into the mask at 6:16 p.m. His fingers moved slightly on the gurney as his spiritual advisor approached him and touched his leg, praying over Miller.

Miller then took deep breaths and lifted his head off the gurney

several times at 6:18 p.m. He struggled against the restraints on the gurney, shaking and trembling for about two minutes.

Then, Miller gasped off and on for about six minutes.

At 6:23 p.m., a correctional officer leaned down and listened to Miller’s breath. The curtains closed at 6:32 p.m. Prison officials said Miller’s official time of death was 6:38 p.m.

Alabama Department of Corrections Commissioner John Hamm stated to reporters following the execution: “There’s going to be involuntary body movements as the body is depleted of oxygen, so that was nothing we did not expect. ... Everything went according to plan and according to our protocol.”

Miller was the second person put to death with this torturous method. The first person executed by nitrogen suffocation—in Alabama and the nation—was Kenneth Eugene Smith on January 25, 2024. The *Montgomery Advertiser* described what happened after the nitrogen began to flow:

He took deep breaths, his body shaking violently with his eyes rolling in the back of his head. ... Smith clenched his fists, his legs shook under the tightly tucked-in white sheet that covered him from his neck down. He seemed to be gasping for air. The gurney shook several times during this time.

Also on Thursday, September 26, Emmanuel Littlejohn was executed by lethal injection in Oklahoma. Littlejohn, 52, was convicted and sentenced to die for his role in the shooting death of convenience store owner Kenneth Meers during a robbery in 1992. He was put to death despite a 3-2 vote recommending Republican Governor Kevin Stitt spare his life and convert his sentence to life without parole.

Littlejohn admitted to his involvement in the robbery, but said that his accomplice Glenn Bethany pulled the trigger, killing Meers. Bethany was sentenced to life in prison at an earlier trial, where the prosecution argued that Bethany was the shooter, something the jury in Littlejohn’s case never heard.

Governor Stitt refused to commute Littlejohn’s sentence. “A jury found him guilty and sentenced him to death,” he said. “As a law-and-order governor, I have a hard time unilaterally overturning that decision.”

Littlejohn received a lethal injection at the Oklahoma State Penitentiary. As he was strapped to a gurney with an IV in his right arm, he looked toward his mother and daughter, the Associated Press reported. Ceily Mason, his mother, sobbed quietly and clutched a cross necklace during the execution, which began shortly after 10 a.m. Central Time. He was pronounced dead at 10:17 a.m.

Marcellus “Khaliifah” Williams died by lethal injection Tuesday,

September 24 at the Potosi Correctional Center Mineral Point, Missouri. He was pronounced dead at 6:10 p.m. Central Time. As the WSWs wrote:

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. ...

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.

Williams’ defense argued that the prosecution had excluded all but one African-American juror, that Williams’ trial attorney had failed to raise exculpatory evidence, and that the prosecution recklessly mishandled the murder weapon, contaminating DNA evidence that could have proved Williams was not the perpetrator.

Two of Williams’ previous dates with death were called off due to questions concerning his guilt. But Missouri Attorney General Andrew Baily, a rabid pro-death penalty Republican, vigorously sought his execution and Republican Governor Mike Parson refused to commute his death sentence.

Both the Missouri courts and six black-robed fascists on the US Supreme Court also gave their assent to Williams’ state killing. After the high court’s ruling, Tricia Rojo, Williams’ attorney, stated:

Tonight, Missouri will execute an innocent man, Marcellus “Khaliifah” Williams. ...

The prosecutor’s office that convicted and sentenced him to death has now admitted they were wrong and zealously fought to undo the conviction and save Mr. Williams’ life. More than one million concerned citizens and faith leaders implored Governor Parson to commute Marcellus’s death sentence. Missouri will kill him anyway.

That is not justice. And we must all question any system that would allow this to occur. The execution of an innocent person is the most extreme manifestation of Missouri’s obsession with “finality” over truth, justice, and humanity, at any cost.

Williams died by lethal injection at the Potosi Correctional Center Mineral Point, Missouri. He was pronounced dead at 6:10 p.m. Central Time.

Also on Tuesday, September 24, Travis Mullis, 38, was put to death at the state penitentiary in Huntsville, Texas. Mullis was convicted and sentenced to death for the sexual assault and stomping death of his three-month-old son Alijah in 2008.

Like so many inmates on death row, Mullis lived a life of poverty and abuse. He was orphaned at 10 months old and adopted by his uncle and aunt. His uncle Gary Mullis sexually abused him for three years, up to age six, and was convicted and incarcerated for molestation.

After age four, Travis Mullis often received psychiatric treatment for psychological problems, including suicidal and homicidal behavior. He reportedly heard voices and had flashbacks of his childhood sexual abuse whenever he molested young children. He was sent to a school for emotionally troubled juveniles at age 13.

Mullis had waived his right to appeal his death sentence. Before his lethal injection, he said, “I don’t regret this decision, to legally expedite

this process. ... I do regret the decision to take the life of my son.” He was pronounced dead at 7:01 p.m. Central Time.

The first to die in the week of executions was Freddie Eugene Owens, on Friday, September 20, in South Carolina. Owens, 46, who had taken the name Khalil Divine Black Sun Allah in prison, was convicted and sentenced to death for armed robbery and the murder of convenience store cashier Irene Graves in 1997.

Owens was put to death days after a key witness for the prosecution, Steven Golden, his former friend and co-defendant, filed a sworn statement saying Owens was not at the store when Graves was killed. Golden said he was pressured by police to name Owens as the shooter and feared that if he named the real shooter he might be killed.

Prosecutors never found the murder weapon and there was no forensic evidence linking him to the crime. However, this lack of evidence and Golden’s statement failed to sway the South Carolina Supreme Court, Republican Governor Henry McMaster or the US Supreme Court that his life should be spared.

“Freddie Owens did not kill Ms. Graves. His death tonight is a tragedy,” Gerald “Bo” King, his attorney, said in a statement. “[His] childhood was marked by suffering on a scale that is hard to comprehend. He spent his adulthood in prison for a crime that he did not commit. The legal errors, hidden deals and false evidence that made tonight possible should shame us all.”

Owens was put to death in the state’s death chamber at Broad River Correctional Institution in Columbia. His execution began at 6:35 p.m. Eastern Time and he was pronounced dead at 6:55 p.m. He was the first South Carolina inmate to be executed in 13 years.

With the deaths of Owens, Mullis, Williams, Littlejohn and Miller, the US has now executed 1,600 people since the US Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty in 1976. There are an estimated 2,250 prisoners currently languishing on death rows across the US, according to the Death Penalty Information Center.

Joseph Kishore, the Socialist Equality Party’s candidate for president, wrote on X after the execution of Marcellus Williams:

The Socialist Equality Party demands the immediate abolition of the death penalty and an end to all forms of state-sanctioned murder. ... The fight against the death penalty is part of the broader struggle against capitalism, a system that thrives on inequality, exploitation, and violence.

Abolishing the barbaric institution of capital punishment requires overturning the rule of the criminal capitalist oligarchy and ending the capitalist system that the state exists to defend.



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