A week of state killings in America: Executions in Indiana, Texas and Tennessee

Kate Randall
23 May 2025

Three death row inmates were executed this week, bringing to 19 the number of people put to death so far in 2025, including 3 in South Carolina, 4 in Texas, 2 in Alabama, 5 in Florida, and 1 each in Louisiana, Arizona, Oklahoma, Indiana and Tennessee. Eight more executions are scheduled before the end of the year.

The three men executed this week all died by lethal injection. As is so often the case, their lives were plagued by either mental illness, mental disability, substance abuse, or a combination of these conditions.

Legal avenues to halt their executions had been closed by the judicial system, despite arguments by their attorneys that they deserved to have their cases reexamined based on new evidence, they posed no danger to society if their sentences were commuted to life in prison, or their mental condition was such that they were unable to understand either the gravity of their crimes or their punishment.

Tennessee

Tennessee carried out its first execution since 2000 on Thursday, May 22. Oscar Franklin Smith, age 75 at his execution, was convicted and sentenced to death in 1990 for fatally stabbing and shooting of Judith Smith, his estranged wife, and her teenage sons, Jason Burnett, 13, and Chad Burnett, 16, at their Nashville home in 1989.

At Smith's sentencing hearing, a clinical psychologist who had evaluated him diagnosed him as suffering from paranoid personality disorder, chronic depressive neurosis and paranoid delusional disorder. He reportedly did not want to use an insanity defense because it might prevent him from obtaining a home loan in the future. He would never see that future.

A Davidson County Criminal Court denied requests to reopen Smith's case despite new evidence that the DNA of an unknown person had been found on one of the murder weapons. The judge wrote that the evidence of Smith's guilt was overwhelming and that this new evidence did not warrant reopening his case. Smith maintained his innocence until the end.

Smith's execution had been on hold for five years, first due to COVID-19 and then by a temporary reprieve from the governor, Republican Bill Lee, due to concerns over the preparation of the lethal injection drugs to be used. A yearlong investigation into Tennessee's execution procedure revealed that prison authorities were not following the state's protocol for procurement, storage and testing of the lethal chemicals used.

The new written protocol has been revealed only in redacted form, is only half as long as the previous one and grants substantial discretion to prison officials in its administration. The state is now using a single drug, the barbiturate pentobarbital, instead of the three-drug protocol used previously.

Smith was strapped to a gurney with an IV inserted into his right arm, which was attached to a long tube that ran into a different room where the execution drug was pumped in. In his final statement, he addressed Governor Lee, saying in part:

> Our justice system is broken. Somebody needs to tell the governor the justice system doesn't work. Too many innocent people are being killed. I'm not the first and won't be the last.

The *Nashville Scene* wrote on the execution at the Riverbend Maximum Security Institution in Nashville on Thursday morning, "Within moments after the pentobarbital was administered through a tube from another room, Smith closed his eyes and lay motionless. His breathing stopped, and the color in his face turned red and then blue. It took seven minutes from the time he received the dose until he was pronounced dead [at 10:47 a.m. CDT]."

© World Socialist Web Site

Assistant federal public defender Amy Harwell, one of Smith's attorneys, commented after the execution:

> Because an autopsy would violate Oscar's deeply held religious beliefs, we will never know for sure whether he experienced the torture of pulmonary edema while Tennessee took his life. We do know, however, from the dozens of autopsies that have been performed on those executed by pentobarbital, that this execution method causes excruciating pain and suffering. Our State should stop poisoning people to death in this cruel manner.

Texas

Matthew Lee Johnson, 50, died by lethal injection Tuesday, May 20, for the murder of 76-year-old Nancy Judith Harris during a convenience store robbery in Garland, Texas, a suburb of Dallas. Johnson accepted responsibility for the brutal crime, in which the woman was doused with lighter fluid and set on fire, but said he was under the influence of drugs and alcohol at the time.

Johnson's defense argued that their client had been sexually abused as a child and began smoking marijuana at a young age. He began abusing crack cocaine as an adult.

UPI reported on statement of his attorneys:

> The night before the crime, he had been drinking at a wedding reception, which he left at about midnight and bought some crack. Between 4 a.m. and 5 a.m. he smoked 10 rocks of crack, then took a Xanax. At 6 a.m., he drank a bottle of red wine.
>
> He went to the convenience store in order to rob it to buy more drugs, they said.

In his final statement in the death chamber at the state penitentiary in Huntsville, Johnson apologized to Harris' family, some of whom witnessed his execution, saying:

> To Mrs. Harris' family, as I look at each and every one of you, I see her on that day. I just please ask for y'all's forgiveness, I never meant to hurt her. I pray that she's the first person that I see when I open my eyes, and I will spend eternity with her.

He was pronounced dead at 6:53 p.m. CDT.

Indiana

The *World Socialist Web Site* has reported on the execution of Indiana death row inmate Benjamin Donnie Ritchie, 45, which also took place on Tuesday, May 20, in the early morning hours.

Ritchie was convicted and sentenced to death for the fatal shooting of Beech Grove police officer Bill Toney. He was the second person put to death in Indiana following a 15-year hiatus, due to the state's inability to obtain the drugs needed to carry out lethal injections.

Ritchie's attorneys argued before the Indiana Parole Board that information about his intellectual disability had not been considered at his trial. He was diagnosed with a form of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder resulting from his mother's daily alcohol and drug use during pregnancy, which they said can cause severe brain damage and limit cognitive functioning to the level of intellectual disability.

Ritchie was brutally abused by both his parents; his mother also abandoned him twice. His attorneys said this abuse and neglect contributed to a 2005 diagnosis of bipolar disorder.

The parole board voted unanimously to recommend Ritchie be denied clemency, and the execution proceeded after Governor Mike Braun, a Republican, denied his clemency request.

The media was denied access to Ritchie's execution. The Associated Press and four other media companies are arguing in a federal lawsuit that such bans are an attack on freedom of the press, which is protected by the First Amendment. A federal judge denied a preliminary injection that would have allowed journalists to witness Ritchie's execution.

Ritchie was executed by lethal injection at the Indiana State Prison in Michigan City. He was pronounced dead at 12:46 a.m. CDT.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site