

# Former political prisoner Gary Tyler publishes *Stitching Freedom: A True Story of Injustice, Defiance, and Hope in Angola Prison*

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*Stitching Freedom, A True Story of Injustice, Defiance, and Hope in Angola Prison.* By Gary Tyler, with Ellen Bravo, Atria/One Signal Publishers, October 7, 2025, ISBN-13978-1668097328, 288 pages.

Gary Tyler, the political prisoner who was sentenced to die in the electric chair at age 17 in 1976, has published an autobiographical book, *Stitching Freedom: A True Story of Injustice, Defiance, and Hope in Angola Prison* (with Ellen Bravo). Framed for murder, Tyler was held on death row for two years and spent nearly 42 years incarcerated for a crime he did not commit.

*Stitching Freedom* is a remarkable book that workers and young people entering into struggle should read, both for its profoundly moving personal narrative and its searing critique of the American capitalist system.

It is at once a history and a warning, whose contemporary significance jumps out at the reader. The cruelty inflicted on Tyler by the capitalist state under both Democrats and Republicans—who kept an innocent man in prison for decades—is a salutary lesson. The bipartisan nature of the class war against the working class is especially evident today in the horrific rise of social inequality, poverty, and the growth of the repressive state and its brutal use, especially among immigrants.

Gary Tyler was a working-class youth from Destrehan, Louisiana, whose father was a maintenance worker and whose mother worked as a domestic. As a high school student, he was framed, convicted, and sentenced to die in Louisiana’s electric chair after a sham trial overseen by notorious racist Judge Ruche Marino, allegedly a member of the White Citizens Council, the suit-and-tie wing of the Ku Klux Klan.

After the Supreme Court declared Louisiana’s death penalty law unconstitutional, Tyler remained behind bars at the notorious Angola State Penitentiary, ultimately spending nearly 42 years in prison. He emerged as a national and international symbol of racism and American “justice.”

In 1976, the Workers League—the predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party—and its youth organization, the Young Socialists, launched a national and international campaign to free Gary Tyler. Reporters from the party traveled to Louisiana, investigated the circumstances of his arrest and conviction, and exposed the case as a carefully staged frame-up by the state, insisting that it was not simply an example of “Southern justice” and racism but an attack on the entire working class.

The Trotskyist movement mobilized young people, workers, and trade unionists across the US and abroad, distributing tens of thousands of copies of the pamphlet *The Frame-Up of Gary Tyler* and collecting nearly 100,000 signatures on petitions demanding his release. Marches were organized throughout the country, culminating in a demonstration in Harlem on December 4, 1976, attended by several hundred youth and trade unionists and addressed by Gary’s brother, Terry Tyler. Gary’s mother, Juanita, and Terry Tyler also spoke at a Young Socialists

conference in Detroit earlier that year.?

In his memoir, Gary pays tribute to this campaign, praising Helen Halyard and Tom Henehan of the Workers League and Young Socialists for their tireless efforts on his behalf. Henehan, who played a leading role in mobilizing workers in New York City for Gary’s freedom, was murdered at a fundraising event for his defense in October 1977. Halyard, who died two years ago at the age of 73, was then assistant national secretary of the Workers League. She regularly visited Gary in Angola Prison and maintained a close relationship with his mother until Juanita’s death in 2012.?

The Workers League explained that Tyler’s case signaled a broader turn to domestic repression by the corporate-financial elite and its two-party system in response to mounting social and economic crisis, and that the methods used against him would be directed against the entire working class—black and white, immigrant and native-born. On this basis, it called for the independent mobilization of workers and youth, and opposed all tendencies that tied the defense to the Democrats or reduced the struggle to a purely racial question.?

Gary Tyler’s incarceration ultimately spanned the administrations of seven Louisiana governors and seven US presidents, from both the Democratic and Republican parties, none of whom granted him a pardon or meaningful assistance.

Democratic Governor Edwin Edwards presided over his arrest and death sentence and ignored the nearly 100,000-signature petition delivered to his office in 1976; subsequent governors from both parties likewise refused to act, despite repeated recommendations for clemency from the Louisiana Board of Pardons, until Tyler finally secured his release through a plea agreement in 2016.

Although only the governor could formally pardon him, federal administrations shaped the punitive environment in which his case unfolded: Gary was arrested just after the resignation of President Richard Nixon, whose “war on crime” and “war on drugs” helped inaugurate the modern “tough on crime” era, marking a shift from a professed emphasis on rehabilitation toward a regime of punishment and social control, bound up with his racist “Southern strategy” to realign national politics.

However, the 1994 crime bill passed by Democrat Bill Clinton, largely written by Senator Joe Biden, led to an unprecedented rise in the American prison population. Clinton also expanded the federal death penalty by adding dozens of new death-eligible offenses.

Gary’s book pointedly states, “When I went to prison, there were some three hundred thousand people locked up in US jails. Now there are over two million.”

Since his release at the age of 57, Tyler has become a mentor to homeless youth and a successful artist specializing in appliqué-patterned quilts and textiles, a technique he learned in prison. He has exhibited his

work at Frieze Los Angeles, the Library Street Collective in Detroit, and the Official Welcome Gallery in Los Angeles, and it has been notably acquired by the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History, the California African American Museum, and the Santa Monica Art Bank.

### **Tyler's arrest and conviction**

The new volume reveals previously unpublished details—fabricated evidence, coerced confessions, and false witness statements—that confirm what the Workers League and Young Socialists insisted from the start: the case was a deliberate frame-up from the police investigation through the courtroom.

“October 7, 1974, was the day the world changed for me,” Tyler writes, describing with searing clarity every face, conversation, and confrontation with authorities that followed.

That day, Gary was on a bus of black students integrating Destrehan High School when a mob hurled rocks and bottles. A shot from the crowd killed 13-year-old Timothy Weber. The bus driver, Ernest Cojoe—a black auxiliary policeman and veteran—testified that the shot could not have come from inside the bus. Despite thorough searches that turned up nothing, Gary was singled out after he defended his cousin, who was wearing a chain with a bullet. Arrested by Officer Nelson Coleman for “disturbing the peace,” Gary was taken to the station where Deputy V.J. St. Pierre beat him with a truncheon—provided, according to accounts, by Coleman—and several officers joined the assault as his mother heard his screams.

Gary later described the beating when he spoke at the University of Michigan in April 2025: “My mother walked into that room and saw what had happened to her child ... (They) didn’t care if I lived or died.”

Gary’s murder trial, which began on November 5, 1975, was a sham designed to secure a death sentence. To meet Louisiana’s narrow definition of first-degree murder, the prosecution manufactured a claim that a second victim suffered “great bodily harm,” despite the alleged injury to Roland LaBranche—a “nick” to the arm—being trivial, as Gary noted.

A hand-picked, all-white jury was chosen in a parish (county) that was 25 percent black. Gary’s inexperienced attorney, Jack Williams, failed to challenge the judge’s gross bias. After nine days of trial, the jury deliberated three hours and returned a guilty verdict. On that basis, Judge Marino set May 1, 1976, as the execution date. Subsequent legal work by Jack Peoples and Tulane law students exposed that all four black student witnesses later recanted, citing police coercion—Natalie Blanks swore prosecutors threatened to take her baby if she did not testify—and affidavits documented police coaching and threats that the court ignored.

### **Imprisonment in Angola**

The book opens with Gary’s harrowing account of his first day at Angola. To his horror, one of his first experiences as a prisoner was witnessing the savage act of a prisoner on a different floor being set on fire.

“I was seventeen years old, barely five feet tall, and less than a hundred pounds. Watching that glow was a shocking reminder that I was helpless. Here’s an individual that’s burning up. He’s not a fresh fish like me, he’s been here, and look what happened. How am I going to keep that from

happening to me?” (p. xi)

Angola prison was established on a former slave plantation, named after the African country where many blacks were captured for the slave trade. Although the majority of the inmates in the early 20th century were white, by the 1960s, the population became overwhelmingly black. Charles Wolfe and Kip Lornell, authors of *The Life and Legend of Leadbelly*, stated that Angola was “probably as close to slavery as any person could come in 1930.”

The conditions in Angola were brutal and dehumanizing. Tyler reports that the guards passed the food to the prisoners on the floor, where vermin had an equal right to it. Prisoners were often turned against each other by the guards to keep everyone divided. Tensions and violence were widespread.

Tyler explains that he was taken under the wing of a section of left-wing prisoners who had been active in the Black Panthers. The first thing they did was convince Tyler of the need for a public campaign to build political support. Although he was educationally challenged, they helped him write and circulate a statement about his case. Tyler called it a “Letter from Death Row.” The letter proved to be decisive in informing the public about his wrongful trial and death sentence.

His militant friends also physically protected and educated him. Tyler said they introduced him to books on Marxism and black liberation, including, as he stated, “Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, George Jackson, Karl Marx, and Ho-Chi Minh.”

Through this relationship, Tyler came to understand that his conviction was bigger than himself. It was part of a systemic policy produced by the capitalist state to control and oppress the masses of working people in the US and internationally. He writes:

As a kid, I thought the people calling me the N-word and giving me the middle finger were dangerous and crazy people I needed to stay away from. From my mentors and protectors, I began to understand there was more to it. These white folks, themselves working people, had been taught that Black folks were nobodies, inferior and harmful... The guys educating me connected this to capitalism, that there was a class of people in charge who benefited from racism. People running the system do what they can to divide people up by race or gender or class—“Look who’s taking your job or moving out of the ghetto and into your neighborhood!”—so we’ll focus on blaming each other and not look at who’s responsible for the economic deprivation and hardship of people. And who benefits? The rich. (p.65)

### **Developing the skills of an artist**

After eight years in CCR (the maximum-security division), Gary was moved to the general population in 1984. Two years later, he joined the Drama Club and earned his GED—turning points that set him on a new path. He blossomed as a leader in the Drama Club, winning respect even from prison authorities.

In 1997, he was chosen for the newly formed hospice program, selected for his reputation for honesty and reliability. Quilting began modestly as a hospice fundraiser and a way to mark the completion of training.

A former weightlifting champion from 1990 to 1993, Gary was initially reluctant to quilt, but fellow inmates and his graphic arts training taught him cutting, machine work, and appliqué. He soon produced his own designs; to his surprise, the quilts sold quickly at prison venues. Gary’s quilts also became popular among hospice families who received them

when their loved ones passed away. For Gary, making quilts became a critical creative and communal outlet during his time at Angola.

## **Pound of flesh**

Throughout his stay in Angola, Gary was focused on the goal of getting out. His case had come before the pardon board three times; each time, the Board voted to recommend clemency, but Democratic and Republican governors refused to act on it.?

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, at the April 29, 2016, hearing, the state of Louisiana insisted that Tyler had to accept a guilty plea for manslaughter in exchange for his freedom.

Tyler said he was adamant that he would not state he was guilty. In the courtroom, as he had promised, Tyler did not make a confession. Instead, he expressed his sorrow over Timothy Weber's death and his sympathy for the Weber family, something he had long wanted to do.

Once he was released, Tyler devoted his energies to developing his skills as a fiber artist and opponent of the Prison Industrial Complex and the death penalty. Tyler has won numerous awards and has spoken at institutions internationally in opposition to the injustices he witnessed in Angola. In April 2025, Tyler gave a statement to the WWSW calling for the release of imprisoned Palestinian graduate student Mahmoud Khalil.

## **Conclusion**

We are increasingly living in a police state created by the Trump administration. The Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) thugs are reproducing the conditions Gary faced in prison. It is estimated that approximately 200 people have died in ICE immigration detention since 2003, and that at least 32 migrants have died so far in 2025. Gary doesn't say so, but he is not just an oppressed black man from the South. Like the immigrants being arrested by ICE, he is a worker. Racism has always been used to divide the working class.

Gary's story has enormous relevance today. The same racist views designed to divide the working class in Destrehan, Louisiana, in the 1970s are being reproduced today by the ruling class in both the Democratic and Republican parties against immigrants. And who benefits? The rich.

The working class is oppressed, but it is also the only revolutionary class in our society. The big challenge today is developing revolutionary class consciousness among workers so that the international working class can unite its enormous power. It is for that reason that our party has established Socialism AI to assist workers with their education.

Gary's book, *Stitching Freedom*, resonates with workers engaged in struggles all over the world because it is true. Read it today, and take your stand with the SEP in the fight for socialism.





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