An American horror story: The failed execution of Christa Pike

Kate Randall
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There are incidents in contemporary American society so barbaric that they shock the sensibilities of anyone who stands for social equality, justice and human decency. The state of Tennessee's attempted execution of Christa Gail Pike on Wednesday night is such an event.

The determination of the right-wing majority on the US Supreme Court to see this woman put to death is reprehensible, as is the failure of any section of the national political establishment to speak out forcefully against either the torture inflicted on Pike or the entire barbaric practice of capital punishment in 21st century America. They all stand with the right of the state to kill. The world deserves to be outraged.

Pike, 50, has spent three decades on Tennessee's death row, more than a quarter century of it in virtual solitary confinement in a 7-by-12-foot cell. In January 1995, when she was 18, she and her 17-year-old boyfriend, Tadaryl Shipp, lured Colleen Slemmer, 19, a fellow student at the Knoxville Job Corps, into the woods, where they beat, tortured and killed her. It was a terrible crime, and Pike has acknowledged it as such. "I took the life of someone's child, sister, friend," she wrote in her clemency petition. "It sickens me now to think I had the ability to commit such a crime."

Pike was slated to become the first woman executed in Tennessee since before the Civil War, when it was a slave state. On Tuesday evening, the Supreme Court denied Pike's request for a stay in a two-sentence order with no noted dissents. Around 9 a.m. Wednesday, an hour before she was to die at the Riverbend Maximum Security Institution in Nashville, a panel of the 6th Circuit US Court of Appeals voted 2-1 to stay the execution. Attorney General Jonathan Skrmetti's office rushed to the Supreme Court, denouncing "abusive delay tactics." At about 5:50 p.m., the justices obliged, vacating the stay by a 6-3 vote.

Pike is one of more than 2,000 people on death rows across the country—overwhelmingly working class and poor, many suffering from mental illness or intellectual disability. Many, like Pike, endured childhoods scarred by abuse. She was sexually assaulted by her grandmother's boyfriend from the ages of 2 to 5, raped at 11 by a 37-year-old neighbor and raped again at 17 by a stranger. Her attorneys cite evidence that her mother's heavy drinking during pregnancy caused frontal lobe brain damage. She was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder only after she was condemned. Her inexperienced court-appointed lawyer presented none of this to the jury. She was convicted and sentenced to death.

The Tennessee Supreme Court scheduled Pike's execution for September 30. On that day, witnesses entered the viewing room at 6:41 p.m. and waited nearly an hour behind a closed curtain, hearing Pike's groaning and crying behind it. Her attorneys said it took about an hour to set two IV lines; attorney Randy Spivey counted at least seven needles in her left arm alone. When the curtain opened at 7:26 p.m., Pike said she would leave the world "in love," closing with, "This is a happy day."

Then the pentobarbital began to flow. At 7:34 p.m. she said, "My arm feels like it's about to burst open." She lifted her head and asked whether the burning she felt was normal. The curtain closed at 7:46 p.m. and reopened three minutes later for the second round. Pike began to snore loudly; at one point her head and legs rose off the gurney in a "V" shape. At 8:05 p.m. the curtain closed for good. Witnesses listened to her snoring until 8:53 p.m., when the microphone was cut and they were escorted out.

After her attorneys filed emergency motions, a federal judge ordered medical care. At 9:15 p.m., as media witnesses were briefing reporters, an ambulance and fire truck pulled up to the prison, lights flashing. Pike was taken to a hospital, where she remains in critical condition. The Department of Correction insists it "followed every step" of a protocol that provides backup syringes "if the inmate is not deceased."

It is Tennessee's second failed execution this year. Governor Bill Lee, who called the debacle a "tragedy" while insisting executions must be "effective," has ordered a review and called off the state's remaining execution this year.

The response from right-wing political figures has been grotesque. John Yoo—the former Justice Department lawyer who wrote the Bush administration's "torture memos" justifying waterboarding—told Fox News Thursday that lethal injection is "the most humane method," and asked, "Why not use the firing squad?" He added that "Tennessee is gonna have to go back and try again."

Pike had said she did not fear death, but the manner of it. "I am not afraid to die," she wrote. "I'm only nervous about the process." Experts had warned the courts that, given her history, she might "feel and believe that she is being raped to death" on the gurney. As her attorney Stephen Ferrell put it Thursday, her greatest fear "was a fear of a prolonged, painful, traumatic death, and that's what happened. Minus the death." As Pike hangs on to life, her nightmare has come true. She may also be left permanently impaired. Dr. Joel Zivot, an Emory University

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medical professor retained by her lawyers, told the BBC, “It’s very possible that as a consequence of the delay of the beginning of resuscitation she will have a brain injury.”

Responsibility for Pike's torture at the hands of the state lies with the entire US “justice” system, above all the US Supreme Court. Why the rush to execution on the part of the black-robed reactionaries in Washington? The 6th Circuit had merely asked for time to “adequately address and resolve” a new claim. At post-conviction hearings, the state had branded Pike a “pathological liar” about her abuse. In August, it conceded that it “does not dispute the terrible things” she suffered.

But the Court’s majority could not allow time for these issues in the case to be examined. Pike's death warrant expired at midnight, and any delay would have sent Tennessee back to court for a new date. The state had set the day, and the execution had to be carried out on schedule.

Justice Sonia Sotomayor, joined by Justices Elena Kagan and Ketanji Brown Jackson, dissented, but in the mildest of terms, objecting that the Court had granted “extraordinary relief solely to allow the State to execute Pike” before her litigation had run its course. None of the three had recorded a dissent the day before when the Court had denied a stay of execution.

The Court's judgment was not solely about the fate of Christa Pike; it was about maintaining the right of the state to kill. The death penalty is used above all to terrorize the population. Since the Court reinstated capital punishment in 1976 after a brief hiatus, it has carved out narrow exceptions under the Eighth Amendment’s ban on cruel and unusual punishment—barring execution of those who were juveniles at the time of their crimes, the intellectually disabled, those who cannot understand why they are being executed and those convicted of crimes that did not result in death. But it has consistently upheld the right of the states and the federal government to kill its citizens. The Court drew the line for juveniles at 18. Pike was 18.

The Court has ruled on the constitutionality of the numerous methods of state murder devised by the states and federal government—electrocution, lethal injection, nitrogen asphyxiation, the firing squad—but has consistently refused to rule the practice of capital punishment itself unconstitutional. The justices’ wranglings over the various gruesome methods of killing are aimed at ensuring that the assembly line of death keeps moving. As for the suffering inflicted on the condemned, it was defended by a Court majority that declared in 2019 that the Eighth Amendment “does not guarantee a prisoner a painless death.”

The death penalty is the ultimate weapon of class rule. The same state that straps a traumatized woman to a gurney to be subjected to torture and death at home is waging war on Iran and arming the genocide in Gaza, killing tens of thousands. The ICE Gestapo rounds up immigrants, detains tens of thousands in ICE camps and this year shot to death four innocent people in cold blood on the streets. On any given day, nearly 2 million people are incarcerated in America’s prisons and jails.

Popular support for the death penalty sits near historic lows, with support among young people plummeting. Growing numbers of Americans are revolted by the type of gruesome spectacle on display yesterday in the Nashville execution chamber. The same outrage is reflected in the upsurge of working-class struggles, and in the protests against ICE and US military terror. But it is necessary to locate the source of this violence and misery.

Socialist Eugene V. Debs, pointing to the class base of social inequality and misery, told the court that sentenced him in 1918: “If there are still vast numbers of our people who are the victims of poverty and whose lives are an unceasing struggle all the way from youth to old age, until at last death comes to their rescue and lulls these hapless victims to dreamless sleep … it is due entirely to the outgrown social system in which we live that ought to be abolished not only in the interest of the toiling masses but in the higher interest of all humanity.”

Karl Marx, locating the source of crime in the capitalist social order, writing in the *New-York Daily Tribune* in 1853, asked, “Is there not a necessity for deeply reflecting upon an alteration of the system that breeds these crimes, instead of glorifying the hangman who executes a lot of criminals to make room only for the supply of new ones?”

The Enlightenment thinker Cesare Beccaria wrote in 1764 that the death penalty is not an act of justice but “a war of the nation against a citizen” whose destruction it judges useful or necessary. In killing, the state does what it forbids its citizens to do and teaches cruelty by example. To Beccaria’s passage must be added a correction: it is “a war of the ruling class against an individual.”

The Socialist Equality Party stands in these traditions. We oppose capital punishment unconditionally, for the guilty and the innocent alike. The Christa Pike who committed a terrible crime as a teenager was herself the product of a society that subjected her to unspeakable abuse as a child, failed her at every turn and then answered the violence it had bred with the executioner’s needle.

The fight to abolish the death penalty cannot be entrusted to the courts, which have sanctioned every stage of this horror, or to the Democratic Party, which has backed state killing for decades and remains silent as Trump moves to expand it. It is part of the struggle of the working class against inequality, war and police-state violence—a struggle against the capitalist system itself.

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