Former political prisoner Gary Tyler hosts book signing events in Detroit, Cleveland ahead of Grand Rapids gallery show

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Gary Tyler, a former political prisoner who spent nearly 42 years, the majority of his adult life, in prison for a crime he did not commit, recently took part in events in Cleveland and Detroit to publicize his artwork and his book, *Stitching Freedom: A True Story of Injustice, Defiance, and Hope in Angola State Penitentiary*. The book is autobiographical, describing how he was unjustly incarcerated at the age of 16, his time as the youngest person on death row, the campaign for his freedom, his struggle to survive in the notorious Angola State Prison and his turn to art as a means of self-expression and helping other prisoners.

The talks took place ahead of the opening of Tyler's first solo museum exhibition, *Gary Tyler: Rebirth*, at the Grand Rapids Art Museum, running October 3, 2026, through January 3, 2027. The exhibition presents Tyler's textile work as an artistic response to incarceration, survival and the struggle for human dignity.

Tyler's visit to Cleveland on September 26 coincided with the installation of his commissioned work *Realm of Knowledge* at the Cleveland Public Library. The event was part of the library's Prism Project examining the impact of mass incarceration.

Tyler was the victim of a brazen frame-up. He was tried before a judge who was reportedly a member of the racist White Citizens Council and convicted by an all-white jury. The alleged murder weapon was not found during initial police searches and later turned out to be a pistol missing from a police firing range. The only person who claimed to have seen Tyler fire the gun later recanted, saying she had been terrorized by the police into giving false testimony.

Despite this, Tyler was never exonerated. His incarceration spanned seven Louisiana governors and seven presidents, Democrats and Republicans alike, none of whom lifted a finger to assist him, despite multiple recommendations by the Louisiana Board of Pardons that he be freed.

Tyler was released only in 2016, following a series of court rulings on juvenile life-without-parole sentences. Even then, the state of Louisiana made him plead guilty to manslaughter as the price of his freedom.

The Workers League, the forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party, and its youth organization, the Young Socialists, waged a tireless campaign in defense of Gary Tyler, stressing the need to mobilize the working class independently of the Democratic Party and the official civil rights organizations, such as the NAACP, which largely turned their backs on the case. The campaign opposed reducing the case to a purely racial question, stressing that it was part of a broader assault on the working class and a foretaste of the violence the capitalist state was preparing against workers of all races.

In his talk at The Shepherd, an art and cultural center in Detroit, sponsored by Detroit's Library Street Collective and moderated by Ashley Carter, director of the Michigan Justice Fund, Tyler gave a moving account of the circumstances surrounding his arrest.

He told how on October 7, 1974, a white mob attacked a school bus carrying black students amid intense racial conflict over the desegregation of Destrehan High School in Louisiana. A 13-year-old white student, Timothy Weber, was shot and killed.

Tyler, then 16, was initially arrested for disturbing the peace after an encounter with a sheriff's deputy. He was subsequently accused of the killing, beaten by police and pressured to confess. At his trial the following year, he was sentenced to death.

Tyler's death sentence was overturned after the US Supreme Court struck down Louisiana's mandatory death penalty statute in July 1976, and his sentence was changed to life imprisonment.

Tyler described his terror on arriving at Angola, built on a former slave plantation and notorious as one of the most violent prisons in the US. He explained how older prisoners took him under their protection, some of whom had been involved in the civil rights movement and in black

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nationalist organizations, such as the Black Panthers. Tyler has said that what he learned from them helped him understand that his imprisonment was part of a much larger history of racial and social injustice.

They encouraged him to write letters to outside organizations to explain the facts of his case. He emphasized that his eventual release was not simply the result of one legal decision but of decades of organizing, fundraising, letter writing and advocacy by many people, including the Workers League and Young Socialists.

Gary noted that some had died fighting for his freedom, citing Workers League member Tom Henehan, who was gunned down by contract killers in 1977 at a Young Socialists dance in New York City held to demand Tyler's freedom.

Tyler also paid tribute to his mother, Juanita Tyler, who supported him from the day of his arrest and tirelessly campaigned for his freedom. She spoke at a Young Socialist conference in Detroit in 1976 as part of the campaign on his behalf.

During his remarks, Tyler acknowledged the presence of Jerry White, labor editor of the *World Socialist Web Site*, who had visited him inside Angola while a member of the Workers League.

Tyler also described how art became a means of survival. While imprisoned, he experimented with different forms of artistic expression before beginning to make quilts for prisoners dying in the prison's hospice. He was initially reluctant to work with textiles, but soon discovered how deeply his creations were valued by other prisoners.

Tyler said art gave him a way to express experiences and emotions that he could not easily put into words. His quilts also became a means of preserving the humanity of prisoners whom the outside world often ignored.

As Tyler has explained, quilting allowed him to "tell a story" about prison life and to maintain his own sense of humanity. He described one artwork in particular that showed when was being led away from the courthouse in handcuffs by an escort of police, while a crowd of supporters cheered for him. "I got this surge of energy," he says. "I wanted to raise my hands in a fist, but I had handcuffs on, with deputies holding my arms, but I still managed to show defiance, that despite what happened I would continue to fight."

Opposition to the death penalty

Tyler's experience has also shaped his uncompromising opposition to capital punishment.

Asked by White during the Q&A about the impending execution of Christa Pike by the state of Tennessee. Pike, whose execution horrifically failed, leaving her alive but in critical condition, was the first woman to be brought to the execution chamber in the state since the days of slavery.

Tyler denounced the death penalty as "cruel and unusual."

He continued, "I vehemently oppose capital punishment, period," he said. "Whether it is here in Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, California or throughout the country. I feel it is used as a tool of control, to put fear into people's lives."

In a separate statement, Tyler called for the release of Bogdan Syrotiuk, a socialist imprisoned in Ukraine for calling for the unity of Russian and Ukrainian workers against the war.

Remembering those still in prison

Tyler also spoke about his efforts inside Angola to help prisoners overcome racial divisions, including support groups for Latino and Asian prisoners.

He said concern for those still behind bars remains central to his work. "What happened to me happened to people before me," he said, warning that unless the system changes, similar travesties can happen again.

Tyler said the purpose of his artwork is to "educate and enlighten the community about the plight of others." His work, he explained, reflects the men and women he left behind and his obligation "to show society that despite what those incarcerated may have done, those are good men and women we should never forget."

He added that certain "[bad] decisions should not be the cause of being in prison for the remainder of their lives."

We encourage WSWS readers to visit the Grand Rapids Art Museum exhibition, which runs from Saturday through the end of the year. Copies of Gary's book *Stitching Freedom* can be purchase here.

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