

Missouri governor and Supreme Court refuse to halt the execution of Marcellus Williams, an innocent man on death row

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The governor of Missouri and state Supreme Court both refused Monday to halt the execution of death row inmate Marcellus “Khaliifah” Williams. Williams, 55, has spent almost a quarter-century on death row for a crime he did not commit.

Williams, now 55, was convicted and sentenced to death for the brutal August 11, 1998 stabbing death of St. Louis reporter Felicia Gayle. He has consistently maintained his innocence and is represented by the Midwest Innocence Project. A petition calling for a halt to his execution has garnered more than 592,700 signatures on Change.org.

Rejecting Williams’ petition for clemency, including commuting his sentence to life in prison, Missouri Governor Mike Parson, a Republican, stated Monday:

Capital punishment cases are some of the hardest issues we have to address in the Governor’s Office, but when it comes down to it, I follow the law and trust the integrity of our judicial system.

Mr. Williams has exhausted due process and every judicial avenue, including over 15 hearings attempting to argue his innocence and overturn his conviction. No jury nor court, including at the trial, appellate, and Supreme Court levels, have ever found merit in Mr. Williams’ innocence claims. At the end of the day, his guilty verdict and sentence of capital punishment were upheld. Nothing from the real facts of this case have led me to believe in Mr. Williams’ innocence, as such, Mr. Williams’ punishment will be carried out as ordered by the Supreme Court.

The Missouri Supreme Court also rejected a request to cancel the execution so that a lower court could make a new determination about whether a trial prosecutor wrongly excluded a potential African American juror.

Arguing on behalf of Williams before the state’s highest court, attorney Jonathan Potts focused on procedural errors in jury selection and the prosecution’s mishandling of the murder weapon. The state Supreme Court, he argued, should “correct an injustice” either by declaring that a prosecutor wrongly excluded a potential juror for racial reasons or by sending the case back to a lower court to determine that issue.

Williams’ final hope for a reprieve rests with the US Supreme Court.

The clemency petition asking Parson to spare Williams’ life focused on how Gayle’s relatives want his sentence commuted to life in prison without parole. “The family defines closure as Marcellus being allowed to live,” the petition stated. “Marcellus execution is not necessary.”

There is no forensic evidence tying Williams to the crime. Physical evidence left at the scene—bloody fingerprints, footprints and hairs—does not match Williams’. The jury never heard evidence that Williams’ former girlfriend may have planted Gayle’s laptop in his car. The laptop was cited by the prosecution as evidence of his guilt.

DNA evidence on the murder weapon, a large butcher knife, which would definitively rule out Williams as the perpetrator, has been rendered inconclusive through mishandling by the prosecution. His DNA has never been found on the murder weapon, but the courts have rejected this as a reason why his verdict should be overturned.

Two witnesses implicating Williams in the murder, his former cellmate and his ex-girlfriend, both sought \$10,000 in reward money for information leading to a conviction. These witnesses, both convicted felons, are now dead.

Williams has faced three execution dates. On August 22, 2017, just hours before Williams’ second date with death, then-Governor Eric Greitens, a Republican, stayed his execution and convened a board of inquiry to investigate the case and issue a formal report. On June 29, 2023, however, Parson, the current governor, dissolved the board of inquiry

before it had issued a report and set a third execution date, the one that now stands: September 24, 2024.

In January 2024, St. Louis County Prosecuting Attorney General Wesley Bell, a Democrat, filed a motion to overturn Williams' conviction based on a 2021 state law that allows a prosecutor to challenge convictions in cases where the prosecutor "has information that the convicted person may be innocent or may have been erroneously convicted."

At an August 21 hearing before circuit court, however, Williams and his legal defense were hit with a bombshell when it was revealed that the DNA evidence on the knife had been contaminated by the prosecution team through mishandling and improper storage. These "mistakes" by the prosecutors meant that this crucial evidence could not be used to support the prosecuting attorney's claims of Williams' innocence.

A plea deal entered by Williams, in which he would maintain his innocence but agree that the state had enough evidence to convict him, was also rejected by the Missouri Supreme Court at the urging of state Attorney General Andrew Bailey, a rabid pro-death-penalty Republican.

At an evidentiary hearing held September 12, Circuit Court Judge Bruce F. Hilton denied the prosecutor's motion to vacate Williams' conviction and death sentence, stating: "Every claim of error Williams has asserted on direct appeal, post-conviction review, and habeas review has been rejected by Missouri's courts. There is no basis for a court to find that Williams is innocent, and no court has made such a finding."

In a recent campaign statement, Socialist Equality Party presidential candidate Joseph Kishore called for Williams' execution to be stopped:

As the candidate of the Socialist Equality Party for US president, I unequivocally oppose the execution of Marcellus "Khaliifah" Williams, an innocent man on Missouri's death row, set to be put to death September 24. His execution must be stopped!

Williams is one of a five death row inmates scheduled for execution between September 20 and 26. The other four are Freddie Eugene Owens, September 20, South Carolina; Travis James Mullis, September 24, Texas; Alan Eugene Miller, September 26, Alabama; and Emmanuel Antonio Littlejohn, September 26, Oklahoma.

This staggering assembly line of deaths over the course of a week demonstrates the barbaric nature of capital punishment in America, which is still allowed in 27 states, the federal government and the US military. His case, like those of the more than 2,200

men and women languishing on death rows across America, epitomizes what passes for the criminal "justice" system in America.

The Democratic Party has removed any mention of the death penalty from its 2024 platform. Kishore stated:

The Democratic Party's 2016 and 2020 platforms paid lip service to halting executions, but its program in 2024 makes no mention of the death penalty or capital punishment. This is not an oversight. The Democrats' support for the death penalty is of a piece with its embrace of violence and death on both a domestic and global scale. ...

Capital punishment must be abolished as a barbaric and anti-democratic relic of the past and outlawed as a violation of constitutional protections against cruel and unusual punishment. The defense of democratic and social rights, including abolition of the death penalty, is inseparable from the fight for socialism and raises the necessity for the political organization of the working class, independent from the Democrats.

Millions of workers and youth are appalled by the impending execution of Marcellus Williams, an innocent man. If the execution goes forward as now planned at 6 p.m. Tuesday, Missouri's Governor Parson and the entire US political and judicial system will have the blood of an innocent man on their hands.

The *World Socialist Web Site* joins the call to stop the execution of Marcellus Williams and for the abolition of the death penalty!



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