

Missouri executes Marcellus Williams, an innocent man on death row

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Marcellus “Khaliifah” Williams, 55, was killed Tuesday by lethal injection at the Potosi Correctional Center in Mineral Point, Missouri, about 70 miles southwest of St. Louis, shortly after the Supreme Court rejected his request for a stay of execution. The state Department of Corrections said he was pronounced dead at 6:10 p.m. Central Time.

The US Supreme Court refused to spare Williams’ life after he spent nearly a quarter-century on Missouri’s death row for a crime he did not commit. The ruling followed the refusal Monday of Missouri Governor Mike Parson and the Missouri Supreme Court to halt the execution.

Williams was convicted and sentenced to death for the brutal 1998 stabbing death of St. Louis reporter Felicia Gayle. He had consistently maintained his innocence. There is no forensic evidence tying him to the crime. Physical evidence left at the scene—bloody fingerprints, footprints and hairs found—did not match Williams.

Two witnesses implicating Williams in the murder, including a former cellmate of Williams and his ex-girlfriend, both sought \$10,000 in reward money for information leading to a conviction. The jury never heard evidence that Williams’ former girlfriend may have planted Gayle’s laptop in his car.

The ultra-conservative majority on the US Supreme Court rejected two separate appeals on his behalf, over the objections of liberal justices Ketanji Brown Jackson, Elena Kagan and Sonia Sotomayor, clearing the way for his execution.

Williams’ defense had argued that the prosecution at trial had excluded all but one African American juror, that Williams’ trial attorney had failed to raise exculpatory evidence, and that the prosecution recklessly mishandled the murder weapon, contaminating DNA evidence that could have proved Williams was not the perpetrator.

“Tonight, Missouri will execute an innocent man, Marcellus ‘Khaliifah’ Williams,” said Tricia Rojo, attorney for Williams, after the Supreme Court’s ruling. “The victim’s family opposes his execution. Jurors, who originally sentenced him to death, now oppose his execution.

The prosecutor’s office that convicted and sentenced him to death has now admitted they were wrong and zealously fought to undo the conviction and save Mr. Williams’ life. More than one million concerned citizens and faith leaders implored Governor Parson to commute Marcellus’s death sentence. Missouri will kill him anyway.

“That is not justice. And we must all question any system that would allow this to occur. The execution of an innocent person is the most extreme manifestation of Missouri’s obsession with ‘finality’ over truth, justice, and humanity, at any cost.”

Joseph Kishore, the Socialist Equality Party’s candidate for US President, spoke out against the execution Tuesday night on X:

I condemn the state-sanctioned murder of Marcellus “Khaliifah” Williams, who was executed by lethal injection this evening in Missouri despite overwhelming evidence of his innocence.

This brutal act took place in the face of mass opposition, and even as prosecutors who originally tried the case sought to overturn his conviction. It is a grotesque display of state power and a chilling example of the barbarism that pervades the American “criminal justice” system.

On Tuesday, the gang of fascists on the US Supreme Court rejected efforts to stop the execution, allowing the state killing to proceed without hesitation.

Kishore connected the ruling elite’s drive to execute with the nature of the capitalist system itself:

The barbarism of capital punishment reveals the true nature of the American political system. It is a system built on violence, repression and the denial of

basic democratic rights. The state's power to execute its own citizens, often without conclusive evidence or a fair trial, reflects the broader violence of American imperialism, which has killed millions in its pursuit of global hegemony.

The Socialist Equality Party demands the immediate abolition of the death penalty and an end to all forms of state-sanctioned murder. We call for the dismantling of the entire military-intelligence-police apparatus of repression that enforces the interests of the ruling elite. The fight against the death penalty is part of the broader struggle against capitalism, a system that thrives on inequality, exploitation and violence.

Abolishing the barbaric institution of capital punishment requires overturning the rule of the criminal capitalist oligarchy and ending the capitalist system that the state exists to defend.

Williams was one of five death row inmates scheduled for execution September 20–26. Freddie Eugene Owens was put to death September 20 in South Carolina. Travis James Mullis was executed in Texas on Tuesday, the same day as Williams. Two men face execution Thursday, September 26: Alan Eugene Miller in Alabama and Emmanuel Antonio Littlejohn in Oklahoma.

Williams faced three execution dates. In 2015, the Missouri Supreme Court stayed his execution after testing showed his DNA was not on the murder weapon. But the same court rescheduled his execution despite reviewing this evidence.

Just hours before Williams' second date with death, on August 22, 2017, then-Governor Eric Greitens, a Republican, stayed his execution and convened a board of inquiry to investigate the case and issue a formal report. Then on June 29, 2023, the current governor, Republican Mike Parson, dissolved the board of inquiry before it had issued a report and set the execution for September 24, 2024, which has now been carried out.

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."

Critical to Bell's challenge was new analysis of DNA found on the murder weapon, a knife, which excluded Williams as the perpetrator. But at an August 21 hearing before a circuit court, it was revealed that the DNA evidence on the knife had been contaminated by the prosecution team

through handling the knife without gloves.

Bell then proposed that Williams enter a no-contest plea, in which he would maintain his innocence but agree that the state had enough evidence to convict him and accept a life sentence, preserving his right to appeal if his defense discovered new exculpatory evidence.

Presiding Circuit Court Judge Bruce F. Hilton agreed to the plea deal, but Missouri Attorney General Andrew Bailey, a rabid pro-death penalty Republican, claimed that he had "exclusive authority" to review such cases. Bailey sent the case back to the state Supreme Court, which rejected the plea deal and sent the case back to Judge Hilton to hold an evidentiary hearing.

At the evidentiary hearing held September 12—at which the defense was unable to use the contaminated DNA evidence on the murder weapon—Hilton denied the prosecutor's motion to vacate the conviction and death sentence and upheld Williams' conviction and death sentence.

Williams was clearly innocent of the murder of Felicia Gayle. His case demonstrates that the death penalty is meted out in America in the most arbitrary manner—to those denied adequate legal counsel, those facing racial discrimination at trial, those railroaded to death on technicalities, as well as those who are indeed innocent.

The Missouri Attorney General's Office is notorious for its zeal in sending inmates to the death chamber. In 2003, Attorney General Jay Nixon argued that Joseph Amrine, a death row inmate fighting to prove his innocence, should be executed in the name of finality.

"Are you suggesting ... even if we find that Mr. Amrine is actually innocent, he should be executed?" Laura Denvir Stith, a state Supreme Court justice, asked of Assistant Attorney General Frank Jung.

Jung responded, "That's correct, your honor." Amrine was eventually exonerated and released.

The barbaric execution of Marcellus Williams has gone unmentioned by the Biden administration, as well as the two big business candidates for president: Vice President Kamala Harris—who defended the death penalty in court when she was attorney general of California—and Donald Trump—who oversaw 13 federal executions, more than any other president in modern history. Their silence is not an oversight, but an endorsement of this latest crime.



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