

Trump seizes on Biden commutations to pledge resumption of federal executions

Barry Grey

27 December 2024

Donald Trump has seized on Joe Biden's commutation of the death penalty for 37 of the 40 prisoners on federal death row to tout his bloodthirsty support for capital punishment. The incoming president and aspiring dictator denounced Biden's December 23 commutations and pledged to make the resumption of federal executions and an expansion of the death penalty a top priority of his second term.

On Monday, Biden commuted the death sentences of all but three federal death row inmates to life in prison without the possibility of parole. The exceptions were Dylann Roof, who carried out the 2015 slayings of nine black members of Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina; 2013 Boston Marathon bomber Dzhokhar Tsarnaev; and Robert Bowers, who fatally shot 11 congregants at Pittsburgh's Tree of Life Synagogue in 2018.

In the message announcing the move, the White House said Biden opposed the death penalty "in most cases" and his actions would prevent the incoming Trump administration from "carrying out the execution sentences that would not be handed down under current policy and practice."

Biden has no problem supporting mass murder in Gaza with arms and political backing for the perpetrators, but seeks to dissociate himself from the death penalty, "in most cases," because the practice cuts across the efforts of US imperialism to present itself as a force for "democracy."

On Tuesday, Trump denounced Biden's actions on his Truth Social platform and pledged to "vigorously pursue" capital punishment when he takes office for the second time. Trump wrote: "Joe Biden just commuted the Death Sentence on 37 of the worst killers in Our Country." Trump promised that he would direct the Justice Department to pursue the death penalty "as soon

as I am inaugurated," adding, "We will be a Nation of Law and Order again!"

On Wednesday, Trump included in a Christmas message threatening US takeovers of Canada, the Panama Canal and Greenland a further attack on Biden's "pardon" [in reality, commutation] of "the 37 most violent criminals, who killed, raped, and plundered like virtually no one before them, but were just given, incredibly, a pardon by Sleepy Joe Biden."

He continued: "I refuse to wish a Merry Christmas to those lucky 'souls' but, instead, will say, GO TO HELL!"

Trump has a brutal and extensive record of promoting and employing the death penalty, a barbaric relic of the Middle Ages that has been fully abolished by a large majority of industrialized countries, including the major countries of the European Union as well as Australia, Brazil, South Africa, Mexico and Argentina, and ended in practice by the other EU member states.

Since the reinstatement of the federal death penalty in 1976, there have been 16 federal executions. All but three were carried out by Trump during his first term as president. In 2020, the final year of Trump's first term, the federal government executed 10 individuals, the most executions by the federal government since 1896 and more than all 50 states combined that year. Upon taking office in January 2021, Biden imposed a moratorium on federal executions.

In his speech launching his 2024 presidential campaign, Trump pledged to seek the death penalty for drug dealers. He said, "We're going to be asking everyone who sells drugs, gets caught, to receive the death penalty for their heinous acts."

On the stump, he called for expanding the federal death penalty, including for those who kill police officers, those convicted of drug and human trafficking,

and migrants who kill US citizens. During the final weeks of the campaign, Trump repeatedly vowed to push for the death penalty for any migrant who kills a citizen or a law enforcement officer.

There is speculation that upon assuming office, Trump will attempt to have the federal courts take over some state murder cases, such as those related to drug trafficking or smuggling. He could also seek to take cases from states that have abolished the death penalty.

Popular support for the death penalty is actually declining in the US. According to a Gallup poll taken in October 2024, about half of Americans were in favor of the death penalty for people convicted of murder, down from roughly 70 percent in 2007.

Promotion of the death penalty is a critical component of Trump's bid to establish a presidential dictatorship. It is part of the anti-immigrant agitation that is central to his America-first, ultra-nationalistic ideological offensive and fascist incitement. To carry out the mass incarceration and deportation of immigrants, gutting of basic social programs and escalation of militarism and war requires a buildup of the repressive apparatus of the state against the inevitable eruption of mass social opposition. The death penalty is meant to intimidate the population with the lethal power of the state. This is the policy not simply of Trump as an individual, but of significant sections of the American capitalist oligarchy. To this end, all forms of backwardness and reaction must be promoted.

There are many signs of a buildup of internal tensions in the United States that have revolutionary implications. The outpouring of popular hatred for the health insurance industry following the murder of UnitedHealth CEO Brian Thompson, the wave of militant strikes at Boeing, the East Coast docks, Amazon and Starbucks, and the extremely narrow, oligarchic character of the incoming Trump administration presage a government of extreme crisis.

The American ruling class already maintains a vast prison gulag populated overwhelmingly by working class and poor people. According to the Prison Policy Initiative, in 2024 some 1.9 million were locked up in the US, with an incarceration rate of 583 per 100,000 residents. This included 448,000 people who had not been convicted but were locked up in local jails. The World Population Review reported in October 2021 that the US had the most incarcerated people of any

country in the world and accounted for roughly 25 percent of the world's total prison population. It pointed out that the US prison population had exploded since 1972, when it totaled 200,000.

Twenty-five prisoners have been executed in nine states in the United States in 2024 and more than 2,000 prisoners are on death row in states across the country.

In an article published in the *New-York Daily Tribune* on February 17, 1853, Karl Marx wrote:

It would be very difficult, if not altogether impossible, to establish any principle upon which the justice or expediency of capital punishment could be founded, in a society glorifying in its civilization.

His remarks retain their full relevance for the present situation, in which American and world capitalism are descending into global war and barbarism.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact