

State murder in Oklahoma

1 May 2014

The world looked on in horror and revulsion at events that transpired Tuesday evening in the execution chamber at the McAlester penitentiary in Oklahoma. The state was geared up for its first double-execution in 77 years, and Clayton D. Lockett was the first condemned inmate strapped to a gurney as prison officials prepared to pump a mixture of three lethal chemicals into his veins.

The gruesome process began at 6:23 p.m. According to witnesses, after four minutes, Lockett turned toward the witness area. By 6:30 p.m., his eyes were closed, but the state prison warden stood over him and stated, “Mr. Lockett is not unconscious.” At 6:33 p.m., authorities declared him to be sedated.

According to the prisoner’s lawyer, however, a few minutes later Lockett began “twitching” and “mumbling” something unintelligible. The twitching became more violent and resembled “a seizure,” according to the attorney. “He was definitely writhing around. His whole upper body was lifting off the table,” the lawyer said. “What we saw was somebody coming back to consciousness.” The curtains were then drawn over the execution chamber, barring the witnesses’ view.

A prison official appeared later to brief reporters. He said Lockett had been administered all three drugs in the untested protocol, but the prison doctor had determined that the vein being injected had “blown.” Oklahoma’s governor and attorney general were notified that the execution was being halted, and the other planned execution was postponed for 14 days.

According to the Corrections Department director, some 43 minutes after the process had begun, Lockett suffered what “appears to be a massive heart attack” and died in the execution chamber out of the view of witnesses.

The state torture and murder of Clayton Lockett unquestionably constituted “cruel and unusual punishment,” which is banned by the Eighth Amendment to the US Constitution. When the sedative midazolam did not take full effect, he was most likely conscious as the muscle relaxant vecuronium bromide began to stop his breathing and the potassium chloride worked to stop his

heart. By all witness accounts, the prisoner appeared to be in unbearable pain before he succumbed.

Lockett was the 20th prisoner put to death in the US in 2014. The impending double-execution gained international media attention as a legal battle played out between the state courts and the Oklahoma governor’s office over the source and quality of the untested chemicals to be used to put the two condemned inmates to death.

Republican Governor Mary Fallin was seemingly obsessed with ensuring that the state’s killing machine was not shut down. She charged that the Oklahoma Supreme Court had exceeded its authority when it issued a temporary stay last week to consider the constitutionality of the state law that keeps the sources of drugs used to execute prisoners a secret.

The Oklahoma Supreme Court eventually bowed to the rabidly pro-capital punishment sentiment in the state legislature and governor’s mansion and lifted the stay. One Republican state representative, Mike Christian, has introduced legislation to impeach the five justices who voted—even temporarily—to delay the executions.

The prospect of a double-execution using untested chemicals from secret sources prompted international outrage and global media interest. News organizations from Britain, Japan and the Netherlands requested credentials to witness the execution. The *Guardian*’s reporter filed a chilling account of the macabre spectacle, describing how Lockett “thrashed on the gurney, writhing and groaning, as it became clear that the procedure had been botched.”

What occurred inside this execution chamber was particularly shocking and barbaric, but it was not an aberration. The horror that unfolded Tuesday in Oklahoma is only the latest in a series of so-called “botched” executions in which the victims have endured agonizing minutes of pain before dying.

The methods employed and the suffering endured epitomize the brutality of American society and the retribution meted out by the ruling class and its political

representatives on a daily basis—not only against people in far-flung corners of the globe through the exploits of US militarism—but against its own citizens.

For every Clayton Lockett there are millions of ordinary people whose lives are ravaged by the daily violence and brutality of capitalism, but whose stories do not make the headlines. Routine, often murderous, police brutality occurs in communities across the country. In one city, Albuquerque, New Mexico, there have been 23 fatal police shootings in the last four years.

The practice of capital punishment is, in most of the world, and should be everywhere, a barbaric relic of the past. That it flourishes in the United States testifies to the violence of social relations and the brutal character of the oppression of the working class that operates, for the most part, behind the tattered façade of American democracy.

An estimated 2.4 million Americans are in prison or jail, a larger share of the population than in any other country in the world. That figure is five times the average for industrialized countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

Another 4.8 million people in the US are on probation or parole. The US spent \$80 billion on its prison system in 2010, or about \$260 for every resident. The budget for food stamps was \$227 per person.

Those imprisoned are overwhelming working class and poor, and minorities are disproportionately represented. The mentally ill are incarcerated in “civil-commitment centers” in lieu of treatment. Immigrants are locked up in detention centers, many for minor infractions. Over the past five years, the Obama administration has deported a record 2 million undocumented immigrants, while militarizing the US-Mexico border.

More than 3,000 condemned inmates languish on death rows across the country awaiting execution. A new study shows that of all defendants sentenced to death in the US in the modern era, more than 4 percent are likely innocent.

Since 1976, when the US Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty, 1,300 people have been sent to their deaths. These individuals have included the mentally ill and impaired, foreign nationals denied their consular rights, and those convicted for crimes committed as juveniles. Those executed have undoubtedly included people who were innocent of the crime for which they were convicted.

The execution of Clayton Lockett is one of those events that tears away the layers of pretense and hypocrisy and reveals the ugly truth of a society based on exploitation

and almost unfathomable levels of inequality.

The entire ruling establishment—from the Oklahoma prison officials, to the state legislature and courts, to the governor’s office, to the US Congress and the Obama administration—stands indicted for what took place Tuesday night. The US Supreme Court, while ruling in recent years that juvenile offenders and the mentally impaired cannot be executed, has consistently upheld capital punishment.

The Obama administration weighed in Wednesday on the execution of Clayton Lockett, in the two-faced manner one has come to expect from this president. White House press secretary Jay Carney made clear that President Obama supports the death penalty, stating, “While the evidence suggests that the death penalty does little to deter crime, he believes there are some crimes that are so heinous that the death penalty is merited.”

Then he added, “But it’s also the case that we have a fundamental standard in this country that even when the death penalty is justified, it must be carried out humanely. And I think everyone would recognize that this case fell short of that standard.”

Such statements are the height of hypocrisy and an affront to the memory of the hundreds of individuals who have been put to death by the US state in a supposedly “humane” fashion.

Strapping an individual to a gurney and injecting poisonous chemicals into his or her veins for the express purpose of inflicting death can never be carried out “humanely,” and those in authority do not have the right to pick and chose when it is justified. It is the duty of class conscious workers and young people to oppose this vengeful practice in all cases, and not only condemn those in the political establishment that promote and defend it, but struggle to put an end to the system of class exploitation and oppression that underlies it.

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