

# Illinois execution moratorium fuels national drive

by Marianna Wertz

When Illinois Gov. George Ryan (R) called for a moratorium on executions in the state at a press conference on Jan. 31, he not only made Illinois the first state, of 38 which employ capital punishment, to halt executions, but his action fuelled a growing movement nationwide that is seeking to end executions entirely, bringing the United States into line with the rest of the civilized world on this issue.

Given that Ryan is the Illinois Presidential campaign director for Texas Gov. George W. Bush, who holds a U.S. record for executions (116 at last count), Ryan's call is doubly significant. Indeed, Ryan urged other governors to do the same. This reporter called Ryan's office to see if he would explicitly urge Bush to declare a moratorium, but the call had not been returned as we went to press.

Ryan's action was motivated both by the fact that Illinois has released 13 innocent men from death row since 1977 when the death penalty was reinstated in the state (out of 84 total for the nation since 1973), and by the recent filing of a motion in the Illinois Supreme Court in yet another case of possible innocence, by Chicago-Kent College of Law Prof. Richard Kling and four students. They have uncovered evidence that may exonerate Edgar A. Hope, Jr., who they say was wrongly convicted of a 1982 murder. Hope was convicted on testimony by witnesses who now say that the Chicago police coerced them into falsely identifying Hope as the killer.

Ryan said that he was deeply troubled by the 13 instances of innocence. "I now favor a moratorium because I have grave concerns about our state's shameful record of convicting innocent people and putting them on death row," he said. Though he still supports the death penalty for those who are guilty of capital offenses, Ryan said that he could no longer support a system that "has come so close to the ultimate nightmare, the state's taking of an innocent life. . . . Until I can be sure that everyone sentenced to death in Illinois is truly guilty, until I can be sure, with moral certainty, that no innocent man or woman is facing a lethal injection, no one will meet that fate." Ryan also called for a public dialogue on the fairness of the application of the death penalty in Illinois.

The moratorium will not affect prosecutors, who may continue to seek the death penalty, and juries which hand it out as a sentence, because capital punishment is still the law in Illinois. It will, however, put a moratorium on any execution

until capital punishment procedures are thoroughly investigated. There are currently no pending executions in Illinois, where more people have been released from death row (13) than executed (12), since 1977.

## Pressure on 'Dubya'

Whether Ryan urges George W. Bush to institute a moratorium on executions in Texas, Ryan's move is putting intense pressure on Bush. This comes on top of a spate of denunciations of Bush in January, when Texas executed Larry Robison, a paranoid-schizophrenic whose crime was committed after he was refused mental treatment for lack of health insurance. Pope John Paul II wrote a personal letter to Bush on the Robison execution, urging that he be spared, but to no effect.

The Washington-based Religions Action Center of Reform Judaism has sent letters to all state governors, advising them to follow Ryan's lead, and asking, "How many more people would be cleared if other states had these [Illinois'] mechanisms? How many currently go to the death chamber for crimes they did not commit?"

The *New York Times* editorialized, "It is time that other pro-death penalty governors—including Gov. George W. Bush of Texas—acknowledge the flaws, and stop what Justice Harry Blackmun called the 'machinery of death.'"

Ryan should not be given all the credit for his moratorium proposal. In 1997, the Illinois Moratorium Project was organized to halt executions in the state. State Assemblyman Coy Pugh, who has joined in the call for the exoneration of Lyndon LaRouche and for an end to the racist policies of the Democratic National Committee against LaRouche, took the point on the moratorium proposal in the Illinois Assembly. Pugh introduced a resolution in 1997, which gathered momentum with each new release of an innocent from death row. When Anthony Porter, the 13th to be released, walked out of death row in March 1999, the Assembly acted, voting on April 27 to pass the Pugh-sponsored resolution, which called for a six-month moratorium while a task force studied the problem. On Nov. 29, Pugh and other project leaders called for an 18-month moratorium.

Hundreds of organizations in the United States have called for a moratorium on executions, ranging from the American Bar Association to religious organizations, city councils, and human rights groups. (The full list is available from Equal Justice USA/Quixote Center, in Hyattsville, Maryland ([www.quixote.org](http://www.quixote.org)), and organizations are encouraged to add their names to the endorsers list.)

Illinois, however, is the first state to embrace a moratorium. Nebraska's legislature voted for a moratorium in 1999, but that was overridden by the governor's veto.

Internationally, all of America's allies in Europe have banned the death penalty. The Council of Europe and the European Union require a ban as a prerequisite for membership, and both bodies have been pressuring the United States to end its use of capital punishment (see p. 37).