

New Orleans elects formerly incarcerated jailhouse lawyer as clerk of court

written by Gregory E. Williams

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Calvin Duncan at home in New Orleans. After 28 years wrongfully imprisoned, he

now heads the clerk of court's office.

New Orleanians elected Calvin Duncan to be the clerk of court for the parish (county) in a runoff election on Nov. 15. Duncan — who was exonerated in 2021 after spending 28 years in prison — won with 68.2% of the vote, despite intense attacks from the right wing. He ran on a platform of reforming how court records are stored and accessed so people can actually obtain the documents they need.

Both Duncan and his opponent, incumbent Darren Lombard, are Black, but only Duncan has spoken out against the racist violence of the so-called criminal justice system. He used his campaign to expose how the system fails working-class and oppressed people.

Louisiana and Mississippi are neck and neck in terms of states with the highest incarceration rate, and the U.S. as a whole has one of the highest incarceration rates in the world. In 2025, 34.9% of U.S. prisoners are Black, with 30.7% being Latinx. Louisiana has also become a major hub for immigrant detention.

Duncan knows these injustices firsthand. While serving a life sentence, he educated himself to become a jailhouse lawyer, helping many others in prison. He learned exactly how this system is stacked against working-class and oppressed people, and how difficult it is just to get access to documents relating to one's own case.

Obtaining documents is particularly difficult in New Orleans, where the court system still largely relies on paper documents, although that is set to change soon. Many were lost during Hurricane Katrina, and just this past August, the clerk's office had to scramble to retrieve thousands of sensitive documents accidentally dumped in a landfill.

The political establishment's reaction suggested they felt threatened by Duncan's campaign. Incumbent Lombard joined with the racist right wing in calling Duncan a

murderer to make voters doubt the legitimacy of his exoneration. Governor Landry's attack dog, Attorney General Liz Murrill, has led the attacks.

Just as the right-wing and Democratic Party establishment failed to turn New York voters against Zohran Mamdani with Islamophobia, Murrill's campaign against Duncan failed. Voters showed that they are more sophisticated than cynical leaders give them credit for. They are more interested in hearing truth about the oppressive systems they actually live with than whatever those leaders are offering. And they are open to a progressive platform.

I spoke with a law student who saw Duncan give a presentation all the way in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, at a Nov. 5 event put on by the Marquette Law School. He said:

"Hearing him speak, it was impossible to ignore the reality that those incarcerated in prisons such as Angola are real human beings whose lives are being stolen from them by this white supremacist system that is perpetuating the legacy of slavery through new means.

"He emphasized that defending the rights of those accused of crimes is an essential foundation enshrined in this country's legal framework, and now that it is, at least *prima facie*, applicable to everyone, that foundation must be defended vigorously. I believe his perspective is crucial for those who aim to serve the most vulnerable and oppressed in society, as he has been doing so for decades."

Duncan's election is significant because he has sharply raised the problems of racism and police repression at a time when the Trump regime and servile state governments are attempting to stop any discussion of the real history of this country and racist oppression happening right now.

In order to have a just society, we will have to overthrow racist, capitalist

institutions. That will take an incredible mass movement. But elections like this one in New Orleans and Mamdani's election in New York are a temperature check for the mood of the masses, and progressive electoral campaigns can sometimes be used to raise awareness and mobilize people for higher-level struggles. As a temperature check, these election results are promising.

