

Jena 6 legacy: How mass protest turned back white supremacists

written by Larry Hales
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Supporters of the Jena 6 march in Jena, Louisiana, on Sept. 20, 2007.

This December marks 18 years since the start of the case of the Jena 6 Six — Robert Bailey, Mychal Bell, Carwin Jones, Bryant Purvis, Jesse Ray Beard, and Theo Shaw.

These six Black teenagers from the town of Jena, Louisiana, were initially charged with attempted second-degree murder of a white classmate after a series of white supremacist events at their high school. Following mass resistance, their charges were reduced to still-serious aggravated battery and conspiracy to commit aggravated battery.

Because of the racism on display in the operations of the legal system, this case sparked one of the biggest civil rights protest movements in the U.S. since the 1960s. Activists marched in cities across the country, including 60,000 in Jena itself.

This movement preceded Black Lives Matter by about six years and set the stage for much of the mass consciousness surrounding Black liberation, policing, and other issues in the period that followed it. White supremacist groups marched in Jena but were outnumbered and drowned out by anti-racist activists, prefiguring the events in Charlottesville, North Carolina, in Aug. 2017, where white supremacists – emboldened by Trump’s election – openly chanted Nazi slogans but were vastly outnumbered. Organized fight-back works.

The movement was ultimately successful in securing the freedom of the six. By 2009, Mychal Bell’s conviction was overturned. Before a retrial in juvenile court, Bell pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor charge of simple battery. The other five defendants later pleaded “no contest” to the same charge. Beyond the outcomes for these six young men, it is important to reckon with the legacy of the movement, especially in light of Trump’s second election and the onslaught of racist attacks he vows to unleash.

For this reason, Struggle – La Lucha is republishing three 2007-08 articles on the Jena 6 by Black social worker Larry Hales, who was active in the Jena 6 movement in Denver and other cities. We are also publishing a recent interview with Hales conducted because of the anniversary, as well as an interview with Struggle – La Lucha’s Lallan Schoenstein, who participated in the march in Jena.

In the following three pieces, Hales not only sums up the events in Jena but lays out the historical context of lynching and the deep relationship between Klan-type violence and capitalism. This is the kind of history that the right-wing is attempting to keep young people from learning. They would probably like the world to forget the Jena 6 and the mass movement behind them. We have to fight them.

The Jena 6 and the right to self-defense

By Larry Hales, Sept. 24, 2007

“I don’t favor violence. If we could bring about recognition and respect of our people by peaceful means, well and good. Everybody would like to reach his objectives peacefully. But I’m also a realist. The only people in this country who are asked to be nonviolent are Black people.

“Nonviolence is only preached to Black Americans, and I don’t go along with anyone who wants to teach our people nonviolence until someone at the same time is teaching our enemy to be nonviolent. I believe we should protect ourselves by any means necessary when we are attacked by racists.”

—Malcolm X, 1965

Surely no Black person, for that matter any oppressed person, considers the hanging of nooses a prank. Nor should any white person. Such a thing is never done in jest but is a threat of an intended action, a threat meant to control behavior or actions. It

is a threat of an oppressor to keep the oppressed in line. The racists who hung the nooses were very clear on what they were doing.

Thousands of Black people have been lynched in this country, extra-legally and legally. There have been numerous studies of recorded lynchings of Black people, especially between 1865 and 1965. There are no really accurate numbers but most historians agree that these numbers range in the thousands, with the largest disproportionate number taking place in the South beginning with the end of Reconstruction.

The lynchings continued even after 1965. In 1981 19-year-old Michael Donald was lynched in Alabama. James Byrd was dragged to his death in 1998 in Texas; though he was not hanged with a rope, this is still considered a lynching.

So a noose is not a benign symbol.

The young Black students, now known as the Jena 6, who sat under the “White Students Only” tree, challenging a racist code at the high school in Jena, Louisiana, took a bold action. Their action is reminiscent of the actions taken by SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) and other groups at lunch counters during the Civil Rights era in the South.

When the oppressed resist or defend themselves, the state will seek to crush any inkling of resistance and defense before racist terror.

This is so because racism is a weapon of the U.S. capitalist rulers. The virulent ultra-right racists, such as the KKK or Nazi skinheads, are small. It may be difficult to ascertain their actual numbers, but relative to the actual number of people in the United States, their numbers are very small. Even the Minutemen, racists who have doffed their white robes and hoods, are small in number. They have attempted, but failed, to ally themselves with oppressed nationalities who are U.S. citizens against

immigrant workers — to divide the unity of the oppressed.

But, as Sam Marcy, the late chairperson of Workers World Party, wrote in “[The Klan & the Government: Foes or Allies](#)”: “The financing and the spread of neo-fascist and downright KKK and Nazi groupings is a logical supplement to the legal repressive and terrorist apparatus of the capitalist state in times of need. For that reason, a short-lived perspective in fighting the fascist menace is erroneous.”

Movements don’t spring up spontaneously. Marcy also pointed out, “Capitalism is the fountainhead of political reaction in general and of KKK and neo-Nazi terror in particular.”

Reaction springs from the system itself. While ultra-right groupings may appear to be on the fringe and isolated, they never disappear and are never insignificant under capitalism. Groups like the Minutemen, in seething chauvinist fits, will try to appeal to the masses in an economic downturn, such as is beginning now, but they exist to confuse workers in general, to divide the oppressed from one another, but ultimately to maintain the white supremacist-dominated U.S. capitalist system.

The events in Jena highlight perfectly the racism inherent and endemic to the system. Many have and will continue to try to minimize the impact of hanging nooses by labeling it as an isolated event or a prank.

Even in defense of the Jena 6, some may say, “It was just a school fight. Why the ridiculous charges against the six young Black men?”

However, it should be stated emphatically that what the Black youths did was self-defense and that it is the right of the oppressed to defend themselves.

Demonization of Black youth

The state’s response is a symptom of the racist in-justice system. This can be seen in

the criminalization of the poor, especially people of color. Black people make up half of the more than 2.2 million people incarcerated in U.S. prisons. Add the number of people in jails and on parole or awaiting trial, and the number is over 8 million.

Unemployment in the Black community has been consistently in the double digits and in major cities such as New York can be as high as 50% for young men in their twenties. The lack of health care, education, and other disparities are all glaring in the case of Black people in the U.S. and similar for all the oppressed.

Black people are vilified and Black men in particular are made society's pariah. These are the conditions the Jena 6 — Robert Bailey Jr., 17; Theo Shaw, 17; Carwin Jones, 18; Bryant Purvis, 17; Jessie Rae Beard, 14; and Mychal Bell, 16 — lived with at the time of their arrest.

When the nooses were hung from the tree, history compounded with the nature of racism today. If Jena was and is not a racist place, as some white residents have claimed — all while avoiding the mass march that symbolized an uprising of Black people across the country in response to the Jena 6 case — then the students responsible would have been dealt with by the white residents in solidarity with the Black residents.

This, however, is not what happened. A series of events occurred, including the light treatment of the white students who hung the nooses; the threat by the district attorney to make the lives of the Black students disappear with the “stroke of his pen”; the beating of Robert Bailey; the pulling of a shotgun on Robert Bailey and two of his friends, and subsequent theft charges after the young men disarmed the white person.

Nothing was done. What were the young men to do in the wake of these attacks and threats? What was left to them in a small town that is more than 85% white?

When Justin Barker was attacked for jeering Robert Bailey and calling the young men the “n” word, the young men were standing up and defending their fellow students, themselves, and the entire Black community.

The response of the local state officials was an assertion that young Black men don’t have the right to self-defense —that they should cower and hide because the officials already showed they would not act to stop the racists.

The Jena 6 are heroes and should be held in that light, as history will attest. Their actions of defense were for the oppressed of Jena, for the people of New Orleans, victims of police brutality and racist terror. Their actions and the reaction of the state have awakened the Black masses and have sparked an emerging uprising across the country.

It is up to the anti-racist, anti-imperialist movement to lift up the Jena 6. Their freedom must be demanded. All charges should be dropped, and the D.A. should be stripped of his position and license to practice law. And the progressive and working-class movements should affirm and support the right of the oppressed to self-defense.

Jena 6: Slap in the face as Bell sent back to jail

By Larry Hales, Oct. 17, 2007

Mychal Bell, one of the six young heroic Black men that resisted racism in the small town of Jena, Louisiana — located in a parish where arch-racist David Duke received the highest percentage of votes when running for president — has been remanded back to jail.

The young men are now collectively known around the world as the Jena 6.

Bell, who spent 10 months in jail after a fight with a white student and had been convicted of attempted murder, although the white student received only a few lacerations, had his probation revoked for an old drug charge. The drug charge had never been tried.

His father said: "He's locked up again. No bail has been set or nothing. He's a young man who's been thrown in jail again and again, and he just has to take it."

This is obviously an attempt to demonize the young man, who went to the juvenile court thinking that he would have a hearing but instead had his probation revoked. This latest occurrence is a slap in the face. After more than 60,000 people marched on Jena and tens of thousands marched around the country, awakening the anger and frustration and a spirit of resistance in the Black masses, this can be seen as little else than an attempt to quell oppressed people.

The mass marches beat back the conviction on attempted murder charges, and the court had to throw it out and admit that Bell should not have been tried as an adult. The case, however, is far from over. Bell still faces a conviction for battery, and the five other young men still face trumped-up charges; two of them still must fight charges of attempted murder.

All the charges must be dropped. Though the House Judiciary Committee is slated to hear testimony from Rev. Al Sharpton on Oct. 16, the fight must be kept up. The case of the Jena 6 is a symptom of national oppression and the plight of Black people across the country.

Movement to support Jena 6 confronted racism

By Larry Hales, Jan. 24, 2008

Jena, Louisiana, has not only become a symbol of the willingness of the state —the police, courts, and prisons — to crack down on self-defense from racist threats and attacks. Of late, it is also the latest city to be besieged by ultraright forces.

When the Nationalist Movement announced that it would march on Jena on Martin Luther King Jr. Day “to protest the holiday and the Jena 6,” many saw the march’s real intentions: to provoke fear in the Black inhabitants of the town and to attempt to use the scapegoating and criminalizing of the six young Black men who fought back against racism to the racists’ advantage.

Already, the case of the young men had attracted international attention. Officials claim that Jena is a nice town and that people just want to be left alone. When Black students protested a “white students only” tree, however, school officials ignored their dissent, and the district attorney threatened the youth.

The six endured taunts, racial slurs, and an attack. Two young Black men had a shotgun pulled on them. Instead of charges against the bearer of the weapon, the young men were charged with theft of a weapon for disarming the person.

Nothing was done to address the rampant racism. The hanging of three nooses under the “white students only” tree led to light punishment and no criminal charges, though the hanging of nooses constitutes a viable threat and act of terror. When the men who came to be known as the Jena 6 defended themselves against a white youth who taunted them with racial slurs, they were charged with attempted murder.

The acts of the men and the reaction by city officials sparked a rebellion, as tens of thousands converged on the tiny town of Jena and tens of thousands rallied around the country on Sept. 20, 2007.

Another rally in Washington, D.C., a few months later, drew more than 30,000 people, mostly Black. Many recognized the case as a matter of self-defense of the oppressed and the subsequent criminal charges as a reaction by the state meant to quell inklings of self-defense from the oppressed.

The town of Jena had another chance to redeem itself, to prove that it was not a racist town. The Nationalist Movement decided that not only would it march, displaying its vile, fascistic tendencies, but that it would do so armed.

Jena mayor praised ultrarightist

Jena's Mayor Murphy McMillin had met with Richard Barrett — spokesperson for the ultra-right Nationalist Movement — before the rally on Sept. 20 in support of the Jena 6. McMillin has never denied that he told Barrett, "I do appreciate what you are trying to do," and, "Your moral support means a lot." (Chicago Tribune, Sept. 24, 2007)

The action of McMillin and the district attorney, and many of the white residents of Jena is clear enough. Reed Walters, the district attorney, threatened to make the lives of the Black youth who complained about the "white students only" tree disappear with a stroke of his pen.

Justin Barker, the young white man who got beat up, was paraded around as a victim. He also would later try to mobilize white readers of a white supremacist website, according to the same Chicago Tribune article.

It is simple to understand the climate of a town like Jena, a town that is 86% white and voted overwhelmingly for racist David Duke when he ran for governor and for

the Senate. The Barker family even offered a place for Barrett to stay when he came to town before Sept. 20.

The march of the white supremacists turned out to be small, 15-30 people compared with over 150 counter-protesters organized by the Jan. 21st Committee and supported by many other groups, including the International Action Center and Fight Imperialism – Stand Together in solidarity with the Black inhabitants of Jena.

It is important in any period to drown out ultraright-wing racists and to shut down their message, no matter how small they seem. As Sam Marcy wrote in [“The Klan & Government: Foes or Allies,”](#) “The U.S. working class should not fall prey to the deadly illusion that the reemergence of the Ku Klux Klan and the growth of fascist violence in widely separated areas of the country is a fleeting, momentary phenomenon, soon destined to sink into oblivion as conditions rapidly change.”

The above was written during the right-wing Ronald Reagan administration, after the Klan marched on a number of cities, including Washington, D.C. — where they were soundly defeated and driven off by a counter-demonstration.

The analysis is critical because, all too often, there are attempts to paint outright fascistic organizations and individuals as on the fringe. These violent, racist ultrarightists operate out in the open, and even during the most prosperous of times, they are always at least one weapon in the ruling class’s arsenal aimed at smashing any movement for change emanating from workers and oppressed nationalities.

That the U.S. government, local and state governments allow and even appease organizations such as the Nationalist Movement, asserting the First Amendment as their rationale for granting permits and for providing police protection for the racists from the righteous indignation of counter-protesters, shows not only sheer hypocrisy but is a sign of complicity of the keepers of the status quo.

