

Jena showed necessity of class-conscious unity against racism

written by Gregory E. Williams
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Protesters gather before a rally in Jena, Louisiana, in 2008. SLL photo: Lallan Schoenstein

This December marks 18 years since the start of the case of the Jena 6 — 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. The movement ultimately got all charges against the six dropped to misdemeanor battery. All were free by 2009.

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. Below is a recent interview on the legacy of Jena with Lallan Schoenstein, who participated in the march in Jena.

Schoenstein, who prepares the “Struggle for Socialism – La Lucha por el Socialismo” magazine for publication, is a labor union activist and retired child care worker. She’s also a graphic designer who has worked on many books, including those for the [Million Worker March Movement](#).

Gregory E. Williams: Can you say a little bit about how you ended up traveling to Jena to support the six?

Lallan Schoenstein: For me, starting in the 1960s, the struggle against racism was powerful and created hope for a profound change. There was the Civil Rights Movement, the liberation struggles in Southern Africa as well as many anti-colonial victories. When the militant organization of the Black Panther Party faced crushing violence by forces of the state, it laid bare the role racism played in blocking social progress.

It could be seen that the driving forces of reaction in the capitalist system were the tactics of divide and conquer, of keeping society segregated by falsely blaming the most oppressed for the ever-present threat of joblessness, homelessness, and

deprivation.

In 2006, the attack against Black high school students with a display of nooses in Jena, Louisiana, woke the whole country to the residual horrors of the slavocracy. There were protests in many cities. In September 2007, there was a huge march of African Americans in Jena while thousands across the country protested. It should have settled the issue. It didn't. Maybe the outrageously unjust legal accusations and threats of prison sentences on the courageous Jena 6 Black students were somewhat alleviated.

Then, in 2008, when the protests subsided, there was a backlash that arose with the ugly face of the KKK. The white supremacists planned to march on Jan. 21 on a vulnerable Black community in a small rural town, purposefully desecrating Martin Luther King's birthday. They even won a lawsuit to march without a permit while carrying nooses, white cross flags, and even firearms.

GEW: What types of forces from the movement did you encounter?

LS: It felt crucial to join in with wonderfully diverse groups of students and union members who were organizing to gather in support of the action of anti-racist activists in Jena. We came from Los Angeles, Chicago, New York, New Orleans, Atlanta, Jersey City, New Jersey, and Durham, North Carolina to confront the Klan.

GEW: What was it like in Jena?

LS: At the rally, an ominous procession of big SUVs and police cars circled the local park. An organizer from Jena told us that "we have been harassed by the police, pulled over, and ticketed almost every day."

Following the rally, where Black liberation leaders, anti-police activists, and community organizers spoke, a group of over 150 of us marched from the park to the courthouse where the white supremacists planned to hold their rally. Around 15 of

them rapidly dissolved into a wall of police. Together, they attempted unsuccessfully to intimidate our march. We chanted: “No Nazis, No KKK, No Fascist USA!”

The people of Jena did not come out in support of the white supremacist rally. Instead, Black and white gathered along the route, many in solidarity with the anti-racist protest.

GEW: What is the significance of Jena?

LS: The events in Jena occurred in a rural part of the Deep South. Currently, it would appear that many areas like this are captured in a right-wing current. To think so would be to overlook the depth of complex social structures.

Racist bullies can whip up a superficial flood of malfeasance, especially when they are backed by the wealthiest bosses in whose interests they perform. No doubt they are dangerous. It’s important to keep in mind that real social change can only come from the class struggle against oppression. Jena showed how class-conscious unity against racism was needed then and now more than ever.

