‘You never know when an eruption will occur’: A veteran activist on Jena 6 and beyond

written by Gregory E. Williams
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Protesters in Los Angeles after police officers found not guilty in the brutal beating of unarmed Black man, Rodney King. This verdict sparked the 1992 L.A. Uprising.

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 part one of a recent interview on the legacy of Jena with Larry Hales, a Black social worker who participated in the Jena 6 solidarity movement in Denver and other cities. We have also republished three pieces Hales wrote on the Jena 6 in 2007-08.

Gregory E. Williams: Can you tell us about your political development?

Larry Hales: I'm a social worker working in homelessness prevention and eviction defense.

I'm from the former industrial sector of the country, smack dab in the middle – Erie, Pennsylvania, Lake Erie. As teenagers, my parents moved from the deep South, Mississippi, to get jobs in factories. When my father first worked as a janitor, he and then my mother got jobs in a factory. I'm not sure if either graduated traditional

high school. My mother later got her GED. I was born in the ‘70s, both my brothers and I, so we grew up in the ’80s. Our coming of age was after the smashing of the Black liberation movement and all liberation movements in the dark era of the Reagan administration.

I guess it’s hard to put a specific timestamp on deindustrialization because of the tendency to so-called revolutionize the means of production to speed up workers that are left and cast off the others. But in terms of when it hit, I think if you look for a time period when it was on its ascent, the late ‘70s and ‘80s is where it really just started picking up. And that, of course, was a period when Reagan smashed the Air Traffic Controllers union.

So that had a big impact on me growing up with parents working in the manufacturing sector. I didn’t grow up with my mother. She left when I was young. Tried to come back a few times, but I didn’t get to really know her until I was 15 – *really* get to know her.

They were from the Deep South, and I spent many parts of my summers there. But I grew up with family members working in factories in Erie, Pennsylvania. And my father was a UE member who supported Jesse Jackson in ‘84 and ‘88. Jesse Jackson actually spoke to the union in Erie. I can’t remember if it was ‘84 and ‘88, but I remember my father speaking glowingly about that. That had a big impact on me.

And there were these twin calamities that hit in the ‘80s. When I was a kid, parents weren’t pushing their kids to go into the factory. They were pushing their kids to take the civil service exam and become postal workers. That was the big thing. Everyone was telling their kids – Black parents, I don’t know what white parents were telling their kids. I think this was because they foresaw that there weren’t going to be manufacturing jobs.

At that time, people were being cast off and laid off and factories were being

shuttered. This is also right around the time when the U.S. government had made use of the fact (or they allowed, depending on how you believe it happened) that certain communities were being flooded with illegal chemical substances, right? At that time, crack cocaine had hit big. And so you had people in my field who were social workers, who were breaking up families, taking families away. And there was all this pseudoscience about crack cocaine and the people who are addicted to it, and "crack babies," for lack of a better term.

A little bit later, you had the Clinton administration. You had all these bills being passed: the personal responsibility and work authorization bill [editor's note: the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996 was also called "welfare reform"]; you had the omnibus crime bill; you had both anti-terrorism bills under Clinton. These things were all happening, and it just had this effect on the Black community with a huge uptick in people being imprisoned. It was a very tough time.

But the one shining light for me was the L.A. Rebellion. That had a profound impact on me. And I had tried to get a rebellion started myself. My brother worked at Chi Chi's. And so I went in, they're like, "You do something." So I said, "We're all gonna rush in there, like you go first." I went in the back door, stole some steaks and some other stuff, and ran out. And I thought everybody was going to start rushing, and it was going to start this big thing, but nothing happened, unfortunately.

But the impact the L.A. Rebellion had on me and seeing the people who could fight like that – that impact set a pretty firm political foundation for me. And it wasn't a straight line. I got in a lot of trouble. Things happened. I grew up. I was a Black Muslim for a while; I was a Black nationalist.

I would say that the thing that really got me formally into politics was going to Palestine in 2002. (And I was in the military before that, from 1997-1998 but was kicked out. Really a medical discharge, a complicated thing. It's a contradiction,

right?) And so, after Palestine, I didn't turn back from that point. It started the leftward trajectory. Being able to see the Palestinian struggle and be involved in it to some degree is a point at which there was no going back. Because I saw people that had very little means with which to fight but were willing to use their very bodies; they were fighting because they really had no choice. It was either fight or allow yourself to be disappeared.

And, you know, *that,* to me: I feel like if Palestinian people could fight with *very* little, and still be hopeful, and still be able to smile, still be able to enjoy one another's company – all these things that are actually part of resistance because I think the oppressor always tries to stamp that out. But that act in and of itself, being able to love and be loved and to share these quiet moments – personal, intimate moments with people – is an act of resistance. And that, along with the act of physical fighting, to me, is why I believe that it is my duty to continue to fight as much as I can until I'm no longer around anymore.

GEW: When you look at the L.A. Rebellion – in the longer timeframe – it's sort of an island of struggle erupting in a bleak period after the '60s and '70s. And like you said, the country went through Reaganism and deindustrialization. But moments like the L.A. Rebellion really spark something. And I think we're seeing those moments happening in quicker succession in the past 10 to 20 years.

And that's what I'm getting at in my second question:

In your writings from the period of the Jena 6 campaign, you put those events in historical perspectives up to that point, addressing the terrible history of lynching, and explaining what these events in Jena really meant. This was when some in the media, and leaders in the town, would try to brush it under the rug. "Oh, hanging nooses in trees is just a youthful prank."

This December, we're coming up on the 18th anniversary of the events that started

the case of the Jena 6, which was in 2006. This was a couple of years after Katrina, a big thing for us here in Louisiana. It was several years before Occupy, and it was before the Black Lives Matter movement that began several years later. It prefigured Charlottesville with the white supremacist march in the town and the mass fight back against that.

At the same time, there was a movement to take down symbols of white supremacy all over the country and outside of the U.S., including in the Caribbean, for example. Here in New Orleans, we had the Take 'Em Down movement to remove symbols of white supremacy. That was most active around 2015 to 2020. White supremacists from around the country gathered here to defend Confederate monuments. This is at the height of Trump's first presidency. But they were outnumbered by thousands opposing white supremacy. It got so intense that at one of the biggest marches, law enforcement had snipers posted up on top of buildings surrounding the crowd. Ultimately, many of the monuments were taken down.

Then in 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, workers carried out work stoppages across the country, resisting the bosses who were endangering their lives. Millions were dying from the pandemic globally, including well over a million people in the U.S. Nurses went on strike. Sanitation workers went on strike, including here in New Orleans, where there was a strike of majority Black, non-unionized sanitation workers. Nationally, retail workers went on strike, etc.

Simultaneously, the movement around the police murder of George Floyd grew to gigantic proportions. That was probably the biggest mass uprising of the period. Millions were in the street. And our editorial view in Struggle-La Lucha is that it was really this mobilization of the people that kept Trump in check, not the Democrats. It wasn't all the legalistic stuff, but the people in the streets, the solidarity.

And now we have the Palestinian struggle, which has been a mass movement. And that's one of the biggest flashpoints since the 2020 George Floyd summer. That's

just a summation of points in the struggle leading us to where we are now. Feel free to bring up anything that I missed or that you want to talk about. There's a lot we could get into with the labor movement: the 2018-19 Red for Ed teachers' strikes, the campaigns to unionize Amazon and Starbucks, the historic auto strikes of 2023.

But just thinking about this span of time and the people's struggles, what do you see as the significance of the Jena 6? How does that fit into this narrative of recent history?

LH: I would say that the Jena 6 marked a resurgence of the Black struggle in a lot of ways. Not that it had ever gone away, but I think that it was a start of this new struggle against the repressive state.

My generation, what they call Generation X, at the time when it was young, was probably called the most progressive generation yet. But if you look at people who made up that generation now — obviously there's been two or three generations since then – but the people who I grew up with who were thought to be progressive aren't so much now, necessarily. I think people are like that, you know, because they're dialectical. People are shaped; their ideas are shaped and molded and changing, sometimes contradictory and go back and forth. But I think that if it wasn't for the Jena 6, I can imagine that if it wasn't for that uprising, that struggle, Barack Obama wouldn't have been elected in 2008. I think that he was elected on the back of that uprising. Some people may disagree.

I think that the ruling class at a certain point realized what they needed in terms of the masses of people being excited about that. It came at the right point in history, I guess. And I think in terms of what it meant as far as white supremacy and the growth of white supremacy, I feel like if we go back to 2008, Black people were excited. There were a lot of people who were excited. I think it was one of the elections in this country that had the most participation of people who were of age to be able to participate in the election, if not *the* most.

But it had a very brief honeymoon, right? It lasted right up until Henry Louis Gates was arrested. And Henry Louis Gates is not progressive by any means in the Black context. He can be counter-reactionary. He's one of those middle-of-the-road academics. But that experience and Barack Obama's response to that, it seems in a lot of ways, led to a lot of liberal white people to basically turn their backs on him (especially middle-class moderate to liberal white people).

And I think that they initially supported him because politically he was actually a moderate anyway. He was more of a Reagan Democrat, as they say. But he also symbolized the hopes and dreams of Black people who never dreamed that they would live to see a Black person hold that position. But right around that time is where we saw the growth of the Tea Party movement and the development of this new, more vocal, white supremacist, fascistic base that has grown louder and also younger. That has grown in numbers since then, especially under Trump.

And it's something that is a reaction to the growth of neoliberalism and this global competition that opened up, especially with the collapse of the Soviet Union, and more workers able to be exploited by capital, being offshored and shipped out. And so in that destruction and ruin of working-class jobs – good paying jobs with unions and benefits – you got this trend towards reaction, not just in the U.S., but in the whole Western metropole world, the European countries. So you had this growing, which has gotten even bigger, and you have this new reaction to the repressive state growing from the Jena 6. And with George Floyd 14 years later – and not just George Floyd, but with Michael Brown, and all the other instances of police brutality that sparked these mass movements – that may have happened, but I think the Jena 6 and the uprising that happened with the Jena 6 laid the groundwork for this type of response.

I feel that it's not just that there are Black people, and oppressed people, and white folks as well, who are progressive to revolutionary. It's like these two poles have

erupted in U.S. society, one reactionary and the other progressive. And I think that going forward, especially with people who are participating in the Palestinian movement, we have to begin to not just engage (revolutionaries have already been engaging), but we have to find a way to communicate the growth of these phenomena to one another and build some type of cohesive movement amongst the so-called revolutionary left, but also be able to engage with these movements. Because it seems as if a lot of times there's this eruption and it doesn't completely go away. And then people get tired because they don't see victories. But we have to use opportunities, things growing and developing to learn from the people involved, but also develop the political consciousness of the people involved. Somewhere in there, I think, is my answer to your question.

GEW: I think it's in there for sure. Thank you. You've given a very good global answer, like putting it in a global perspective. In terms of capital, even – what's happening with the capitalist system.

So, how did you become involved in Jena 6 solidarity? And what movement activities did you engage in?

LH: I found it like a lot of other people. I think it was Michael Baisden's radio show that really broke the news. Then Jasiri X made a hip-hop song about it and a video, if I'm remembering the order of things correctly. That helped spread it. That's where a lot of people found out. And so we had a number of solidarity actions in New York. I wasn't able to go to Louisiana, and I can't remember exactly why that happened, but I was still living in Denver at that time. I didn't move to New York until a little bit later, but we had actions in Denver, of course.

Denver has an interesting history with the Black community and other oppressed communities as well. So I participated in a lot of actions, and I wrote a lot about it and I talked a lot about it and what it meant – the significance of it to the history of the Black struggle, but also the struggle against the repressive state. And I think

that some of the victories that we have had in terms of mass incarceration owe to that period in history, that start.

In terms of what it *meant* to me, well, sometimes even when you're involved in a political struggle, you get sort of demoralized and upset. And then these things like the Jena 6 movement happen – seemingly from out of nowhere – and it makes you believe in the possibilities of people. And you never really know when an eruption is going to occur, but you should always, to some extent, be ready for it to occur. And that was one of those things that was a big shot in the arm, I think, not just to me, but to a lot of people, to say that, yes, we can, in a moment's notice, rise up. And we are very much still aware, just as the rest of society is, of social relations as Black people in this society.

Lallan Schoenstein: Larry, when you were in Denver, I remember you were very involved in the struggle against police brutality, and you were coming under a lot of personal threats. And while you were living in Denver, we were really scared for you.

LH: Yeah, I had my home raided, I think the same year my mother died. It was Nov. 30, 2007. I remember because I was watching the Lakers in Milwaukee. And there was a gentleman by the name of Joe Teague who had been shot by the police, by a parole officer, because parole officers in Denver, like a lot of major cities, carry guns and they have badges. And he had been shot three times, and he had violated and was sent back to prison. And I was his lifeline on the outside. I was in contact with his mother, and then he paroled out and rolled to my house.

And then one night, it must have been almost 11:00 p.m., 10-12 police officers and parole officers showed up at the door doing the cop knock, which is not a knock, but like just pounding like they're breaking the door down. That ultimately led to me being arrested and jailed.

And there was also a girl, Cassidy, who had her collarbone fractured by a cop who was moonlighting in a parking lot with King Soopers [supermarket], which was part of a mini-mall. We had organized a campaign, and we had boycotted that King Soopers because two security guards who worked there helped that cop. And we basically said, "If they don't respect our community, then we shouldn't shop there." And it was successful. It was so successful that they had a couple of so-called leaders hold press conferences announcing that the boycott was over. These were people who weren't part of it. They took advantage of a woman who was, unfortunately, very mentally ill, and they had her coming around to the rallies saying that I worked for the police. They tried to snitch-jacket me. So they used a number of tactics to try and quiet that movement.

But it was a very tense time. It was definitely a tense time, especially when they raided the apartment. They threw me around the apartment and ripped out my hair, punched me in the stomach and threatened me. And at one point they drove me around the back, behind the apartment building, and I just thought … You didn't know what was gonna happen. I didn't know what was gonna happen. I was like, "This is it." And he's arguing with me, and I'm arguing with him, and I'm like, "Listen, you're gonna do what you're gonna do anyway." So he's like, "Be quiet." I was like, "No, you're gonna do what you're gonna do, but you're not gonna have my dignity. You ain't gonna get me to shut up." My mouth could have got me in a lot of trouble, but I was gonna be in trouble anyway, so I might as well use the one weapon I had, which was to tell them how I felt.

GEW: They used so many tactics of repression against people in the struggle, especially Black people, and we saw that recurring throughout the Black Lives Matter movement in different cities.

LH: A common theme for sure. Yeah, absolutely.

To be continued