

From Jena 6 to Wisconsin State Capitol occupation: struggle transforms people

written by Gregory E. Williams
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In response to a capitalist assault on workers' rights, activists occupied the Wisconsin State Capitol for several months in 2011.

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 two 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. You can read part [one here](#).

Do it like Wisconsin

Gregory E. Williams: From my perspective as a white organizer, we try to support movements of racially oppressed people, or *nationally oppressed* people, to use the Marxist term. In my experience, it can often seem easier for us to just go and participate in the marches, which we need to do. (Getting in the streets is the only way we're going to survive the fascist steamroller that's coming – or is actually already here.) But marching, etc., can sometimes seem less daunting than just trying to have a conversation with a strange white person and talk to them about racism, or even class. And I'm from rural Louisiana. Or even talking to co-workers and family.

One time, I was handing out flyers at a bus stop in New Orleans with a longtime Black organizer in the city - a Black communist. And he said, "are you afraid to talk to white people? Scared they're going to be racist and say some backwards shit?" And I was like, "you know, I guess I *am*." And he's like, "I'm not *afraid* to talk to them. Like, what do you think is going to happen?" Now, I'm not talking about trying to infiltrate the Klan! By all means, be safe. Every situation is different, but we were in a group passing out flyers at a bus stop.

I raise this just because, as white activists, we often don't actually do that work of trying to reach other white workers who are prey to MAGA and all this kind of crap. Racism runs deep, and people are subjected to racist lies continually, inundated 24/7 with corporate news and often total disinformation on social media. That's all most people ever hear.

But at the same time, people are transformed by *struggle*, and it can happen fast. Did you notice any changes, say, in white people - white working-class people, especially - being won over in the course of struggles like the Jena 6 movement?

Larry Hales: One of the biggest moments I've seen in relatively recent history was the seizure of the state capitol in Madison, Wisconsin, in 2011. Wisconsin has a very interesting history, but there were a lot of reactionary bills coming down.

We can follow the trend back to the '90s, for example, with the Bradley Foundation. [editor's note: a right-wing Milwaukee-based non-profit that undermines public schools by supporting "school choice," just like the ultra-rich Walmart heirs]. I mean, in those days, the amount of money that the Bradley Foundation was putting into political campaigns pales in comparison to what happens now. But at that time, they had W-2, or Wisconsin Works, which was sort of a testing for what became the Personal Responsibility for a Work Opportunity Act. [editor's note: the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996 was also

called “welfare reform”] The Bradley Foundation put a lot of money into the Clinton campaign, even though that act was actually written by Newt Gingrich and his movement.

Newt Gingrich wrote that bill with some of his cronies. But it was very much trumpeted and supported by Bill Clinton. The Clinton administration represented – even though it had been happening over history – but they represented that big shift politically for the Democratic Party on a national level. And so not only that but the whole privatization movement of public schooling. There were a lot of pilot programs in Wisconsin, and the whole myth of the welfare queen and the utilization of that. There were a lot of bad things happening in the corridor to Wisconsin, the Racine, Milwaukee area, which is where the Black population is concentrated. And that represents the beginning of the attack on not just the social safety net, but public monies and public benefits.

And when Act 10 was happening after Governor Scott Walker’s election, it was like the white people outside of the corridor area (and even in that area) who had supported these policies realized ... I don’t know if anyone ever said it, but I feel like this became something that was focused on one population, even though the majority of people who benefit from welfare are not Black, they’re white – white women in particular. But there’s that idea that these people on welfare are generally Black. They think, “this is something that Black people are taking advantage of, they’re taking your public money, they’re taking your tax money, yada, yada, yada.”

[Editor’s note: the 2011 Wisconsin Act 10 is a bill designed to systematically strip public-sector workers of their rights while cutting pay and benefits. This is the bill that sparked the movement in Wisconsin.]

But when they rose up, I think that those differences, those beliefs began to sort of melt away. Based on what I understand, the conversations that happened – people began to see this as a *public* attack. It may have started with one population of

people, but it was part of this trend. And I think that what it sparked in people, like it woke up our collective imagination of what was possible, even though they ultimately lost. But not only just what's possible but what's *necessary*. Like, they seized public property and they held it for three weeks or more. And like the whole world just – people from Egypt were paying for pizza orders for the people inside the state capitol.

Lallan Schoenstein: It was magnificent.

LH: Yes, and I think that is one of those moments where people began to see the common cause of the struggle. And there have been others, but the most dynamic one I've seen is that seizure of the state capitol. And I believe that inspiration has to be taken from that. Because – even if we don't say it outright, when we see these moments, these things like the uprising of the Jena 6 – it gives inspiration for what could transpire later. And there have been some great moments. It's almost as if we only think about the losses that we've had. We've had a lot of tremendous losses. There's a lot to be sad about, but there's a lot to be energized about that happened in a very short period of time, too. And I think it was between the uprising in Jena to the takeover of the Madison State Capitol. [editor's note: Activists occupied the Madison State Capitol between February and June 2011].

GEW: So it was a little before Occupy [which started around September 2011].

LH: Yeah, it was during a time of the budgeting crises in all the major cities, right? It was the end of the Great Recession, but when things were still kind of picking up, and then I think there were all the budgeting crises. But yeah, that was one of the big moments for me that showed that white people – the white working class – were waking up in their potential to understand the history of the events that unfolded.

GEW: I'm really glad you brought that up because I left Wisconsin out of my little summation. But that was really a pivotal moment. And maybe you could even say the

Tea Party – starting with the Tea Party and then Trumpism – that’s kind of like the shadow side of that. It’s like, what happens when consciousness is thwarted. It’s like people going back to *sleep* – especially white people going back to sleep. And it’s not just MAGA. The Democrats have played a role in drawing people away from the struggle.

LS: It’s also the AFL leadership of the labor movement and their role. The leadership’s very racist. I’m talking about the top echelons who are playing golf with the Supreme Court. The labor movement really has to come from the rank and file. The [Million Worker March](#) on Washington in 2004 is an example of the Black labor movement rising up from the rank and file. We have to mobilize in our own name and try to build something outside of the leadership’s collaboration with the Democratic Party.

I mean, I worked for Unite Here!, and I saw firsthand how the State Department plays a role directly in the top leadership of the unions and keeps things under control.

It’s sort of like the way we used to analyze the Soviet Union.

GE: Right. We support the unions just like our tendency always supported the Soviet Union because the Soviet Union remained a workers’ state. It was a vehicle for workers’ power just like the unions are, even if the leadership distorts that vehicle of people’s power. Like I said, we support the unions, but it’s the political consciousness, the organization of the rank and file that’s the decisive factor. Having good, fighting leadership is a big advantage, though.

LS: Yes. And the leadership of the labor movement is standing on the backs of the workers. They wouldn’t exist if it wasn’t for the workers. But on the other hand, if they can keep the workers passive, they can just do all their collaboration shit.

What happened in Wisconsin had so much potential. It had enormous potential. I mean, I think that the broader progressive movement actually could have gotten more behind it. The left should have been more engaged. And I think that that potential, and what Gregory was talking about during the pandemic – all those strikes, there were thousands of strikes. Every little borough in the country had strikes for protective gear for dangerous working conditions. I mean, people were using the opportunity. It was giving them something to hold onto to fight back. I think that the labor movement has potential. Wisconsin really showed that. And movement coming from the rank and file, and that rank and file supporting the struggle for Black liberation; and support for all oppressed peoples, for gay and lesbian and trans liberation, for just the unity, fighting for unity, you know, and against this onslaught from the ruling class.

LH: I was reading [Message to the Workers of Louisiana](#) by Sam Marcy. And I remember David Duke's campaign. [editor's note: KKK leader David Duke ran for governor in Louisiana in 1991 and lost to Edwin Edwards.] I was 15, somewhere around there. But I remember that campaign. I obviously didn't know about Sam Marcy. I knew about communism. It was sort of like the monster underneath your bed that they talked about in school. It was like a bad thing, but I didn't know that there was a communist *movement* in the United States. I mean, leadership. I do remember the Erie Daily News running an interview with communist organizers in the '90s. And I do remember being like, "Huh, where are these people? They seem interesting to me."

But I've always felt that there is a way to reach people. I've always been willing to accept some backwardness because I generally think that the working class has backwardness. And what it *is* just kind of depends, but it's there, and it can't help but be there. I'm not surprised. Even in revolutionaries, there's some backwardness. We have to combat it. But I think that even with some people who vote for Trump, I think he won – not a large percentage – but he did win over percentages of Black

and Latino voters, for different reasons, completely. Some of it having to do with how race is viewed in this period in history, just complicated stuff – nationality, things like that.

But it goes back to that question of neoliberalism and the missteps and mistakes that the liberal party has made with people. We have been told for so long that they represent our interests, yet we haven't seen them deliver anything, so some people say, "This is what I'm doing with *my* vote." And I can deal with that. I can talk to someone like that. I enjoy talking to someone like that because often, people's commitment to some of these backward things is not strong. Sometimes it is. And even if it's strong, I've always found that when I talk to people, it's not like I'm hitting them over the head with stuff. It's sort of like, "Okay, that's an interesting take, but what about *this*?"

And, you know, some people react to the elitism of the liberal party and then totally miss the irony of the richest person in history, Elon Musk, being on stage with Trump and part of a movement, and Trump's supposed to be non-elitist. But this sort of contradiction is typical of fascist demagoguery.

But there's a way to talk to all people. And I think that we have to be willing to engage and talk to people. We have to be able to go to these places, people, and converse with them, and converse with them in a way that they feel respected. I might not respect everything that you believe, but I respect you, and I'm willing to listen to how you got there.

And we can talk about that. Because often people got there because of the ravages of capitalism. They just don't see the left as an option. They don't know that it exists. And they feel that the liberal party personifies that elitism, that disdain for working-class people. And so we just have to be willing to deal with that. And I think that opportunities open up when there is something like Madison, Wisconsin. But we have to be able to do it even when something like Madison, Wisconsin, does not

exist. And it can be hard. It can be sad. But it's something that must be done.

GEW: You can hear the elitism when liberals talk about Trump, and they call him a populist, and they use the word populist like it's a dirty word. And part of this book that I'm putting together - and what this interview is partly for - is about this history of populism and dispelling the myth that there is a right-wing populism. No, that's fascism. Historically, populism was a progressive left-wing movement with its own contradictions and everything.

But they use it as this dirty word, basically meaning the masses - the unwashed, the uneducated masses. That's how it comes across from liberals. And it seeps into the left movement as well. And we can all fall into that trap of talking that way when we're in this really polarized political environment (really fake polarized because the two options are the Republicans and the Democrats). But like you said, most people in this country have never encountered the left at all. Just like you, I never met a communist when I was growing up, so we have to boldly put communist politics out there, and I believe we can do it without alienating people.

We can talk to anybody on their level. And that *doesn't* mean trailing behind the reactionary ideas and going along with it at all. We combat that. It's like an inoculation. The people need to be inoculated against right-wing lies. When we go out and talk to people, we know that they're hearing lies about immigrants, and "welfare queens," and trans women, and that kind of thing. We know that they're hearing that and even people in oppressed communities are gonna repeat backwards crap that's being shoved down their throats 24 hours a day. And we have to be prepared for that and be able to bring people over to the revolutionary struggle. That's a tough thing, but it's gotta be done.

LS: It just makes me think of, like, talking to white workers who in their personal lives could be completely diverse, and even their families could be completely diverse. And they love their families, and they love their co-workers. They love their

friends who could be Black or Latin American or whatever. And then they'll stand there and say something that they get from the media that is just confoundingly racist. They'll parrot something. It's so frustrating. You want to say, "Get in touch with reality, please. You're talking about the people you love, you know." I'm sure you all have that experience. It's unbelievable. It's like this disconnect from their personal lives to what they think they're supposed to think. What they're taught by the media – the constant, constant racism in the media just droning every day.

LH: People have a tendency – I was telling one of my coworkers, I said, "You know, when you're driving in traffic, and that person in front of you is driving slow, it feels like they're doing that *to* you."

GEW: But they don't even know you're back there.

LH: They're just going about their lives. And people think, like, immigrants are doing something *to* them. They're coming here, they're taking something from *me*. And it's like, "Okay, what are you really upset about, though? Are you really upset about people who are basically trying to live?" Like this person who's driving slow, they're on a road trying to get somewhere just like you. Immigrant workers are trying to get somewhere to do the exact same things that you do, that you're trying to do.

I mean, it can be a lot to wrap your mind around. It can be a lot, like the town, Springfield, Ohio. And yes, no matter where you are in the world, when there's a large influx of people to that country, it can be a lot for people to understand and grapple with, and they get anxious, and they're like, "What's going on? And how is this going to impact me?"

Understandable. I can deal with people having those sorts of anxieties, right? And I think that that's where it starts. I can see, okay, it's a lot. But what are you upset with? What's really happening here?

The ways in which people get to the Metropole [imperialist countries like the U.S.], they risk their lives because they don't feel that there's any other choice. It's what President Aristide said: Haitian people are given two options, a quick death or a slow death of starvation. And that slow death of starvation is agonizing because it's not only starving yourself. You're watching your family starve to death. People are willing to risk their lives and risk having a quick death, because maybe I die, but maybe I don't, and then I'm able to save myself and my family from that slow, agonizing death.

So what are we really upset about here? If there is a lack of housing, it's not because immigrants are here; it's because of this system. That's why there's no housing. Immigrants didn't create this system. They're responding to it just like you are. So what are we really upset about here? To my co-worker, I was like, we're not really upset at that person driving in front of us who isn't moving as fast as we want them to move. We're upset because we have so little time to do things because we work until we drop dead. That's what we're upset about.

To be continued.

