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From the Jena 6 to today: Ruling class imprisons youth abandoned by capitalism

written by Gregory E. Williams
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Plaquemine, Louisiana, June 2022 – demonstrators gathered outside City Hall to protest harsher juvenile justice policies announced by the city.

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 parts [one](#) and [two](#) here.

Fake crime epidemic and the criminalization of youth

Gregory E. Williams: I want to touch on some of the current situations here in Louisiana. I'd like to get your thoughts on it. It mirrors what's happening in the country more broadly in terms of these intensified attacks and the far right in power.

Until the beginning of the year, Louisiana had the only Democratic governor in the Deep South, John Bel Edwards. And he's probably to the right of Biden. He'd been governor twice so couldn't run again. But the Democratic Party here ran a Black candidate, Shawn Wilson, who they did not promote at all. I've never seen an election like it. There was nothing. There was no campaign. And the far right Attorney General Jeff Landry won in a landslide. But this was only a landslide among those who voted, and *very* few people voted. There's no popular energy around him and he's a MAGA clone. He's like Governor DeSantis in demonizing LGBTQ+ people.

His main shtick is being "tough on crime" and all this racist language. It's not even really a dog whistle. A dog whistle is something subtle. This isn't subtle. This crime hysteria is so racist, trying to make people afraid of Black youth, basically. And one of the first things he did when he came to power in February 2023 was to ram through a special session on crime in the legislature. And there's a Republican supermajority in the legislature, and they just rampaged and they rolled back every little reform that had happened.

Like I said, we had a very conservative Democratic governor before, but there was some criminal justice reform coming out of the Black Lives Matter period. I'd say that's the reason it happened. It was because of the struggle. So there was some reform, like they were no longer trying 17-year-olds as adults. And Landry's special legislative session reversed everything. They've basically gotten rid of parole. They've approved executing people with nitrogen hypoxia - just horrendous things. And so there's been a big uptick in juvenile arrests.

Some investigative journalism has come out on this. ([Richard A. Webster, Verite News](#)) They're not arresting juveniles for violent crimes because, first of all, there is no juvenile violent crime epidemic. There's some violence but there's no epidemic. So what's happening is that they're arresting masses of teenagers for petty things. And now that the 17-year-olds are being tried as adults again, that stays on their record. Even if they're not convicted of anything, that arrest is on their record, and it's gonna prevent them from getting housing, potentially. It's a barrier when they're applying for jobs, for school, and other things. And they're putting tens of millions of dollars into expanding juvenile incarceration facilities across the state. ([Julie O'Donoghue, Louisiana Illuminator and Verite News](#))

And that's just part of it. I'm thinking about this in terms of the legacy of the Jena 6. And all of this is sort of happening now, and there's really no movement. It's at a low point. There's been a Palestine Solidarity movement, which is good. There is some progressive organizing, but people aren't really in the streets resisting Landry. There's no pushback to speak of, so they're steamrolling everything. And also, his next legislative session is about to start, another special session, which is all about cutting taxes. Well, he wants to cut income tax and corporate tax to help the rich. But he wants to increase the sales tax. That tax burden would be hardest on the working class because it hits everyday purchases. So now he's going to do what he's really in that job to do, which is to help out his millionaire and billionaire friends. [editor's note: these reforms passed]

And he's done it by stepping on oppressed people. He's like climbing over bodies to the top to be able to make it rich. I mean, he's already a millionaire himself through his investments in fossil fuels and this kind of thing. (Hard to trust somebody on the environment when he's making millions from the companies destroying the state.) It's all a huge giveaway to the rich in the midst of intensified attacks on workers. I'm just thinking about the effects, particularly on Black youth. And I'm thinking about this in terms of that history we've been talking about, the Jena 6 to today. I can't dictate what's going to happen, but as a movement, we need to think through this. What are the next steps?

Larry Hales: That whole idea that there's an uptick in crime - I live in New Jersey, but even in New York there's not an uptick in crime. Maybe the seeming randomness of things. And there are things that can be shocking to people, but things like this always happen to some degree. The only difference is information travels faster. There's always somebody there to record. There's so many cameras. You imagine these things that happen, and then you look at the 11 o'clock news, and then we have this photo of this individual, and they can track that person for 10 blocks. We didn't see this happen, but we see this person walking away, and here he is walking to his door. So I think that's one of the things.

But I feel like whenever things like this happen, they get this infusion of money. It's for the developers of the prison industry. It's for every step that's involved in building something that massive and those who are going to profit from it. But, in terms of people, we had something similar when I lived in Denver, and they were building a new "justice system." It had to actually be voted on. And, you know, they want it. And the way they want it is that they were taking people to see the old county jail and city jail. And the conditions were horrible. I've been in the city jail; it was horrible. You had four people per cell, you had two bunks, and two people sleeping on the floor. I've been one of those people on the floor. But I asked the question, "Why are all these people here? Why do they have to be here?"

We had already been fighting this group that called themselves the Molly Brown Coalition and the Guardian Angels. We've been fighting them because they've been posting pictures of people who they say are drug users or drug dealers and putting them on lampposts all around the city.

We used to go and bust up their meetings. If you advertise a meeting publicly it means it's a public meeting and you can record it. The struggle that we raise is that the city has had an uptick in people being arrested for nonviolent drug crimes. And there needs to be drug treatment for users.

And even when there were violent crimes, well, where are these crimes coming from? At the same time that you're doing this, you're closing down schools in Northeast Denver and turning them into charter schools. You're closing down parks for children and opening dog runs. It's not that Black folks in these communities don't have dogs, but there are more children than there are dogs here. So why are you closing down children's parks? Why are you closing down schools? And then you're opening up the schools for lotteries, which means anybody from around the city can apply to be in that school. And it's no longer a neighborhood school.

We can talk about the issues of segregation, but when schooling is based on neighborhood schools and you close down those neighborhood schools, children are shipped to another neighborhood and have to take the bus to get there, and their parents have to plan for that. It disrupts everything for everyone. So we raised the people's platform based on the people's needs.

You're projecting that this many people are going to get arrested, based off *what*? Based off the inability to provide for people's very basic needs. You're telling me there aren't other community-based alternatives to incarceration? That \$100 million that you're spending on that can go towards other things.

I read this thing that one of the people said: imagine you're in your home, and your

wife and your kid (they always say your wife and your kid) are by themselves in this house, and a 17-year-old breaks in and puts a gun to their heads. This was in one of the articles you sent me about the current spike in juvenile arrests in Louisiana. They create this fear, like this is going to happen to you, therefore we need to rein in these wild teenagers.

It's hard to start a struggle when there is no struggle, but often people are resigned to, like, what can we do? What can we do about this? And I think it often starts with, hey, this is happening, what do you think about it? Would you be interested in coming to a community meeting about this, talk about this, and what alternatives there can be? And sometimes, you know, that can start something big. But yeah, I think it's happening in a lot of places. There's this uptick, even though crime is down, they're still building a bunch of prisons.

I think there's always a way to get to people. Did you ever read Paulo Freire's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed"?

GEW: I've only read excerpts.

LH: That's the best way to consume it. I find that with a lot of academic stuff, there's a lot of word salad. It's an important theoretical piece on the point at which struggle, education and learning come together but sometimes you get the primary point out of things and that's what is most important not that you got through the entire book. And I think that's what excerpts do. But that whole idea of joining with and building that dialogue with people and starting from that point. Because I find that often, when it comes to things like this, these types of policy changes and stuff like that, they're the least likely to arouse people's anger and get a movement going.

GEW: Right. Especially until there's a face that they can put on something. You can

point to what's happening systemically with the policy. Okay, we know that more youth are being arrested, but sometimes when somebody gets killed – and you can't predict why that particular death moves people so profoundly. It's so horrible that it has to come to that sometimes, but it catches hold and all the anger comes out at one time. There's a deceptive surface quietude in this society. But like we've been talking about throughout the interview, that can be dispelled in a moment and a whole new sequence of struggle unfolds.

Lallan Schoenstein: I don't know if this is true, but I used to think that when violent crimes occur, very often it's within families when there's just too much despair and helplessness. And it's not like somebody going out and attacking somebody they don't know. It's like anger and despair within a family, which is when they're just pressed too hard, where things are too bad. So, I think the whole thing about violent crime is a myth.

But I was also wondering just about the question of opportunities for, say, teenagers – even just having a job, educational opportunities. I mean, what do they see as a possibility for the future? And when Landry vilifies and attacks them, it is a cynical thing of like, "Well, this is a way to deal with them because we don't have jobs. We're not going to give them any educational opportunities." This whole generation of kids coming up has all kinds of potential, maybe even revolutionary potential. So from the ruling class point of view, jailing them is a way to deal with them. It's just cynical, but I think that that's how they think.

LH: It is. And I think that especially non-white, oppressed youth who have less chances aren't given the benefit of the doubt of being a young person. I don't want to conflate one locality with another and why things happen the way they do, but I think we can generalize. When a white young person commits a crime, the system will just look at them differently. And it will just be like, "This was a bad thing." Like the kid who was inebriated and killed a family of four. I don't want people going to

prison for substance addiction or substance use. But history tells me that if that were a Black youth who did that there would not be a plea deal worked out to avoid prison. And no one in the mainstream media would have looked at them sympathetically and just been like, "Oh, well, this was a mistake. He's going to remember that for the rest of his life." And I feel like this is a prison in and of itself. They would be shouting for that person's head.

And so I think that when people visualize crime in the U.S., it's a certain person committing those crimes. They visualize certain types of crimes and a certain person committing those crimes. And they may not even be conscious of the fact that they're doing that necessarily, right? Sort of an unconscious thing. If someone were to say, 20 minutes ago, someone got shot in some part of town, an image is gonna pop in people's minds, right? And then not only that image, a whole history of this person is going to pop in their mind. And the reasons why this person should be handled this way versus another way. And if it turns out that it's not who they thought it was, then what they think should happen begins to shift and change if that person looks different. It's not all the time, but frequently enough.

And we're just sort of conditioned that way. For instance, we're used to thinking that if someone said that we found this new serial killer, the first thing that pops into my mind is a white guy, a middle-aged white guy. So I think when it comes to youth crime, when they're building youth facilities, they're thinking of a certain kind of youth in prison.

LS: And with these mass killings, immediately you think of a young white person who's coming from a very right-wing, fascist family where they've been brutalized - maybe military.

LH: I stereotype that right away, but it's so often the case.

GEW: And I think this is very conscious on the part of the pundits and the politicians

who're stoking this stuff. I think it's very conscious for them. When we talk about somebody like Landry, he knows *exactly* what he's doing. And he knows that when he says crime - and when he says youth crime - he's talking about Black kids. And his super racist base is eating that up. Like I said, they're not the majority because very few people actually came out to vote for him. But they're eating that up. And then other people who aren't diehard racists still have that conditioning, like you said, because we've all grown up with that.

LS: Here in New York City, almost every single night, there's a police blotter report, and it reports some crime that happened in the city. And they have camera footage. And you really cannot see individual features of the person. All you can see is it's a Black person - it's a Black man - and everybody is supposed to look for this Black man. They ask everybody to look for him. They do it every single night. You can count on it.

LH: Yep, every night, here it comes!

You know, I worked with the homeless population, and my kids asked me - I love talking to my kids, we have the greatest conversations - but they asked me, "Daddy, do you help people?" And I said, "No, not enough at least." And they're like, "Why? Isn't that what your job is?" And I said, well, it's an organization that has limited funds. And often it becomes this chase for funds. And so they're always concerned with data. Data has to say *this* because we need these funds. And then the whole idea of helping people gets lost in the shuffle. It's about the funds. And I get it, you have an organization, you have payroll, infrastructure, and you gotta pay for these things. But the organization with limited funds becomes the answer to what should be addressed societally, I said.

And we worked with people who oftentimes were mentally ill and chemically addicted, and these things have happened. Yes, there's a part of mental illness that

is genetic, where people are genetically predisposed, but it's the interaction of environment and genetics, often. I was like, so what we are seeing is people's response to trauma and hardship, and intergenerational trauma. That's what we're seeing, I said. This society created these conditions that people are responding to and it's not going to be a quick fix. It's not going to be a fix that will happen in this person's lifetime, unfortunately. I wish it would. But knowing that to be the case, there's ways for society to deal with it. And so one of the things people are talking about is this increase in crime. But what are you really upset with here? The city doesn't even have enough psychiatric beds.

LS: I remember in the '80s they closed whole wings of hospitals where there were people who were just on the edge of being able to take care of themselves, or maybe not quite able to take care of themselves, and they just put them out in the street.

LH: And then they warehoused them in jails and prisons. And now that they got rid of cash bail in New York City, and they can no longer warehouse people, people are left to the streets. And everyone's like, "Oh, what are we seeing here?" And I'm one of those people who say, yeah, it's a lot to take in. Believe me, I worked with a population of people who are unhoused. It's a lot to take in. And people are like, "Well, they're using the bathroom on the platform."

LS: Where else are they gonna use the bathroom, right?

LH: It's the most unsanitary city and people blame the unhoused. If you're worried about people using the bathroom publicly, then you should fight for more restrooms. If you're worried about people being homeless on a platform, then fight for housing. And shelters are not housing. The shelter system is horrible in New York City. Absolutely deplorable. If you think they should just go to a shelter, then you go to the shelter and stay there a couple of nights. See how much you enjoy it. Just because a person is suffering from mental illness, that doesn't mean they can't tell

when someone's treating them badly.

So again, what are you really upset with here? What are you really upset about? These politicians like Landry can really turn this around and make it seem as if we need these things and what we really need is something for youth to do, somewhere for them to go, a society where they can feel that they're a part of something.

LS: I just learned something on a Zoom call recently, in a discussion with young people. They said young people under 18 cannot go into some malls or supermarkets or stores anymore unless they have an adult with them. I was like, "What?" And then I went into a local mall and there were signs all over the place. You can't be here without an adult. I'm like, you know, for a young person who doesn't have a lot of resources, the store or the mall is a place where they can go to hang out and see their friends. It's like a home. I think that's a new thing that's happening. We actually are trying to get this young person who's talking about it to write about it. I had no idea, but now that somebody told me, I'm seeing it all over. It's like, no, you can't be here without an adult if you're under 18. Have you seen that in Jersey?

LH: Yeah, in certain areas of Jersey. Whenever there's something that happens with young people, it's all over the news. They play it up. And then that was the atmosphere that led them to create these rules in certain malls.

GEW: There's nowhere for them to go. If you hang out outside somewhere, you're loitering. You've got to be somewhere spending money, but now you can't go in the mall without an adult.

To be continued.



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