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From the Jena 6 to immigrant rights: Fight for others as you'd fight for yourself

written by Gregory E. Williams
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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 four 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](#), [two](#), and [three](#) here.

Gregory E. Williams: Is there anything you'd like to add before we wrap up?

Larry Hales: I left out something when I was talking about workers and families. Aside from that question, "What are you really upset about?" [editor's note: from earlier in the conversation, referring to anti-immigrant, anti-homeless sentiment, etc.] We need to realize that these things aren't happening in a vacuum. When we talk about conditions – or we're seeing a phenomenon that we're having a hard time understanding why it's happening or what the impact is going to be on us – these things did not come out of a vacuum. It's systemic. And I think people either don't know, or they haven't thought about it because there isn't enough time often. Or sometimes people just don't care and you can't always really do that much about that.

But my father, when he left and said to my mom, "I'm not coming back here," he meant because at that point in history, living in Mississippi was very stifling. This was at the end of the Great Migration, the last Great Migration. There were no opportunities, and you were taking your life in your hands even just going to a store. It felt unsafe to be in Mississippi and to be Black because you didn't know what somebody was going to do, how to respond, and you didn't know how you were going to make your livelihood. And opportunities were in the North to work in the factories.

One of the first books I read when I became a socialist was the ["Blast Furnace Brothers"](#) by Vince Copeland. And I used to give that book away as a gift to people. I

said, whether you know a lot about politics or you know very little about politics, this is going to have a profound effect on you.

It's a story about when he was working with Black workers who wanted to be in the repair gang because all the Black workers worked in the blast furnace. And the white workers who were in repair gangs did not want a Black person in the repair gang. In fact, Black people weren't allowed to be in a repair gang. And the person who I'm pretty sure was Vinnie supported that worker getting in a repair gang. And I think Vinnie was ultimately fired and there was a wildcat strike. And it wasn't expected that the Black workers would go on strike for a white worker, but they did. And they were just waiting for someone to tell them.

Part of the backdrop is that, because of the migration that was happening, the white workers in the factories were anxious that these Black workers from the South were taking something away from them. And I think a lot of people fed on that anxiety and it turned into something racist. But we can talk to that anxiety, and we can explain to people that this is happening for a reason. And when it comes to immigrant workers today, they're leaving their homes in large part because of what has been done to them by the U.S.

Not long ago, someone told me a very basic way to talk to workers about this. They said if you're concerned about losing your job because someone is forced and willing to take less, then you fight for that person to get as much as you can. Fight for them to have what you want for yourself. And once you do that, then the bosses have no one left to super-exploit. And that's why you fight for other oppressed workers. Because we want to create a world where you're not the next target. I had left that out earlier, but I think it was important to say. That's part of that explanation for people who have a hard time understanding what's happening with immigrant workers, and they're turned against immigrant workers, and they start taking up these racist lines like they're eating your cats, and they're eating your geese, and

stupid shit like that. It doesn't start at the nonsense about eating cats. It starts with the conditions created by capitalism. And we have to talk about those conditions created by capitalism, but also why people would risk everything to come into a country that has done so much harm to them.

GEW: Right, we can flip that script and explain to people that we have the same enemy at the end of the day. Whether we're born here or we're immigrants, our enemy is the same capitalist class – the same imperialist ruling class. In *this* country, it's the capitalists who are making it to where you can't find affordable housing. But they're also the ones that destroyed the economies of Honduras and Haiti and Venezuela. And that's why immigrants are coming here. So wouldn't it make more sense for us to join with them and fight the ones who are actually screwing us over?

LH: I try to engage with my daughters politically. You know, they're pro-Palestinian. One used to draw all these watermelons for Palestine. And I remember my other daughter said to me once after George Floyd was killed, "Daddy, are the cops going to kill you?" That was 2020, so she was like seven then.

Lallan Schoenstein: That must have been so terrifying for her. Yeah, and it's hard to answer the question. You don't want to lie. You don't want to tell the whole truth, either.

LH: I said something to the effect that we want a society where we don't have to worry about that. So she asked me, "Daddy, is race a real thing?" She's seven.

I said race changes. The whole idea that there's this thing of race that is always *this*, always *this*, I was like, that's not true. Irish people used to be thought of as a different race from the British. Italians used to be thought of as a different race from the so-called nativists in the United States.

I was like, so it's not a real thing, it shifts and changes based on what people in power need it to be. As for our idea of race and the Black race, I was like, there was a little event called Bacon's Rebellion a long time ago. [a 1676-77 armed rebellion in the Virginia colony] There were white indentured servants, which is a form of slavery where people sell themselves for passage to the colony. And there were Black people who were captured. And there was a commonality in that shared circumstance.

And that ended at a certain point, and then race became a thing that was written into law. Not necessarily as in Black and white, but the fact that if you were Black and you were born into slavery, you would exist in slavery. And there was no way to get out of it. There was no period of time in which you ceased to be a slave like there were for indentured servants. You were just a slave. You were enslaved, I should say, not a slave. So I said to my daughter, we want to fight for a world where there's no idea of a white person, of whiteness. I was like, and Blackness is the opposite of whiteness and how race is viewed in our society.

And the pride that we hold in Blackness is different from the pride that a white person holds in whiteness. That pride in whiteness is a pride in what your whiteness *gets* you. The pride in Blackness is a pride in the *resistance* of that Blackness and the struggle against whiteness. I said eventually they will both cease to exist. It's not real and at the same time it is real. It's only real because of history, but it's not scientific otherwise.

