

Thousands demonstrate in support of “Jena Six”

By Joe Kay
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Thousands of demonstrators gathered in the rural Louisiana town of Jena on Thursday to protest the racist prosecution of six black high school students.

The six students face the possibility of over 20 years in prison after a fight that injured one white student, Justin Barker, last December. The incident followed months of racial tension that began when nooses were hung on a tree under which white students usually sat for lunch (the “white tree”). The nooses appeared a day after several black students sat under the tree.

The demonstrations were initially timed to coincide with the sentencing of Mychal Bell, who was found guilty by an all-white jury of aggravated second-degree battery and conspiracy to do the same. His conviction was dismissed earlier this month, however, when a higher court ruled that Bell, who has been in prison since January, should not have been tried as an adult. Bell was 16 at the time of the attack.

District Attorney Reed Walters has pledged to appeal to the Louisiana Supreme Court the decision requiring that Bell be tried as a juvenile. If this appeal fails, Bell’s case will be returned to a juvenile court, along with that of another of the “Jena Six,” Jesse Ray Beard. The other four—Robert Bailey, Jr., Carwin Jones, Bryant Purvis, and Theo Shaw—still face adult charges of second-degree battery and conspiracy.

As the large demonstration in Jena and more than two dozen smaller rallies across the country demonstrate, the case of the Jena Six has become the focus of outrage in the US and internationally over the patently unjust treatment of the young men. The protest is another sign—following mass demonstrations last year for immigrant rights and alongside broad popular opposition to the war in Iraq—of growing disquiet and discontent, which are barely registered in the media and can find no outlet in the parties and institutions of the political establishment.

An article in the *Chicago Tribune* put the number of demonstrators in Jena in the “tens of thousands,” with estimates as high as 50,000. Most of the demonstrators came by bus from across the country. “A seemingly endless convoy of buses from black colleges and black churches around the country jammed the two two-lane highways leading into the town square,” the *Tribune* reported, “where they dropped off their passengers in front of the courthouse.”

The size of the demonstration has taken the media and political establishment by surprise. It was organized largely through the Internet and by word-of-mouth.

The background to the case demonstrates the racist character of the prosecution. The events leading up to the arrest of the six students began on August 31, 2006, when a black student asked at a school function whether it was permissible for blacks to sit under the “white tree” during lunch. After being told by the vice principal that they could sit wherever they wanted, several black students decided to sit under the tree.

One day later, three nooses were found hanging from tree—a clear threat recalling the lynching of blacks in the South during the Jim Crow era.

The reaction of the school and the local district attorney, Walters, provoked outrage among the black students and population of Jena. The three students who were determined to have been behind the hanging of the nooses were given a three-day in-school suspension. Jena High School’s principal had recommended expulsion, but the board of education and the superintendent overruled him.

Black students protested the slap-on-the-wrist punishment for what amounted to a death threat by staging a protest and sitting together under the “white tree.” There were several incidents of fights between white and black students following the noose hanging.

An assembly was called to address the issue on September 6, 2006, at which Walters was invited to speak. At one point during his remarks, Walters, flanked by armed police officers, held up a pen, saying, “See this pen? I can take away your lives with a stroke of my pen.” Walters told the protestors to stop complaining about what he called an “innocent prank.”

In the ensuing weeks, several black students and their parents attempted to address the school board on the issue, but the board refused to place the question on its agenda. On November 1, the main school building was set on fire, in what was believed to have been an arson attack.

On December 1, Bailey, one of the Jena Six, and several of his friends sought entrance to a party that was attended mainly by whites. There was a fight between Bailey and his friends and a group of white men who were not students. When police came, according to Caseptla Bailey, Robert Bailey’s mother, they told her son and his friends to “get back on their side of town.”

The next day, Bailey was involved in another fight during which a white man pulled a gun. Bailey and his friends were able to wrest control of the gun. As a result they were charged with theft of a firearm.

It is within this context of escalating racist provocations, fueled by the actions of the school board and the district attorney, that the December 4 fight took place in the school auditorium. Eyewitnesses report that Justin Barker, a friend of the three students who admitted to hanging the nooses, was taunting Bailey about the fight a few days earlier. A fight ensued between Barker and the black students in which Barker suffered a concussion and other injuries, though he was well enough to attend a school function that evening.

The district attorney originally charged the Jena Six with attempted second-degree murder and conspiracy. These charges were later reduced to attempted aggravated second-degree battery. The charge requires the use of a deadly weapon. Walters claimed that in kicking Barker, Bailey and the other black students employed the “deadly weapons” of the tennis shoes they were wearing.

In addition to the extraordinary charges, the six were given high bail amounts—over \$100,000 for some.

Bell is the only student to face trial so far, and there were many irregularities in the conduct of the trial itself. The jury that was selected was all-white. Bell’s father has complained that the defense attorney, who is black, hardly put up a defense and did not call any witnesses, even though a coach at the school has said that Bell was not even involved in the fight. The defense attorney instead tried to pressure Bell to agree to a plea bargain and testify against the other students, which he refused to do.

The trial of the Jena Six demonstrates that in the United States, the stoking up of racial animosity and the violation of the civil rights of blacks is hardly a thing of the past. The democratic gains made by the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s remain fragile, and by no means irreversible. Just three months ago, the US Supreme Court ruled that race cannot be considered in public school integration plans—an attack on the landmark 1954 decision against racial segregation, *Brown v. Board of Education*.

Notwithstanding the end of Jim Crow segregation, sections of the American ruling elite, most particularly those connected to the Republican Party, have promoted and cultivated right-wing forces steeped in racism. The promotion of racial antagonisms has a long history in the United States, and has been used to divide workers of different races, pitting them against each other.

After its massive defeat in the presidential elections of 1964, the Republican Party moved consciously to base itself on racist elements in the Southern states—a perspective embodied in Nixon’s “Southern Strategy.” This strategy has remained largely unchanged, if generally unspoken. As recently as 2002, then-Republican Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott expressed regret that Strom Thurmond did not win the presidency in 1948, when he was running on a segregationist platform.

The Bush administration owes its victories in the 2000 and 2004 elections in no small part to discrimination against black voters in states such as Ohio and Florida. Behind the recent US attorney firing scandal lay an attempt to put in place attorneys who would facilitate such machinations and sanction the gutting of civil rights enforcement.

After remaining silent for months on the frame-up of the Jena Six, Bush was obliged to address the issue when he gave a

Washington press conference on Thursday, even as the demonstrators were marching in Louisiana. Asked about his reaction to the case, Bush merely said that the “events in Louisiana... have saddened me.” Without indicating his attitude to the trial itself, Bush said, “The Justice Department and the FBI are monitoring the situation down there, and all of us in America want there to be fairness when it comes to justice.”

While the immediate circumstances behind the case of the Jena Six raise most prominently the role of race in American life, both the underlying cause of the injustice and the underlying source of the anger that has provoked mass protest are not fundamentally racial in character.

As the American ruling elite pursues an ever more reactionary and anti-democratic agenda, it will increasingly move to resort once again to racism as an ideological buttress for its rule. It is class interests that are driving the promotion of racial demagoguery.

At the same time, the protest in Jena expressed oppositional sentiments building within American society that transcend the specific issues that the demonstration addressed. Mounting opposition to social inequality and war is fueling what will increasingly take the form of mass protest and social struggle.

The officially-sanctified leaders of the demonstration—Jesse Jackson, Al Sharpton, the NAACP, and others—were largely bypassed in the initial plans for demonstrations against the prosecutions. Their role has been to direct the growing anger into the politically safe channels of the Democratic Party. On Thursday, Jackson announced that he was teaming up with Democratic representatives Maxine Waters, Sheila Jackson Lee and William Jefferson to try to pressure the House Judiciary Committee to launch an investigation.

The issues raised in the Jena Six prosecutions cannot be resolved within the framework of the Democratic Party, which is entirely complicit in perpetuating the social conditions that underlie the renewed attempt to stoke racial divisions. The layer of black businessmen and entrepreneurs represented by figures such as Jackson is indifferent to the enormous social problems confronting workers of all races.

All charges against the Jena Six should be immediately dropped. Those who should be brought to justice are the individuals who orchestrated the racially motivated prosecution of the black students.

An end to racism and all forms of discrimination cannot be realized within the framework of a political and economic system based on ever-growing social inequality. It must be based on the development of an independent movement of the working class, uniting workers and youth of all races, religions and nationalities to fight for their common class interests in opposition to the capitalist ruling elite and its two-party system.

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