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Demonstration in Jena, Louisiana. Jena Ignites a Movement.

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Six courageous families in the small Louisiana town of Jena sent out a call for justice that has now been amplified around the world. Yesterday's mass protests in Jena were unlike anything I have seen in my life, a beautiful and enormous outpouring of energy and outrage that may have the potential to ignite a movement.

The basic facts of the case are by now widely known. In this 85% white town, where the high school yard was segregated by race, a Black student asked to sit under a tree that had been reserved for white students only. The next day, three nooses hung from the tree. The white students who hung the nooses received only a minor punishment, and more importantly, no one in the white power structure of LaSalle Parish, where Jena is located, seemed to take the nooses seriously as racial incident. There were no lectures to the students on the meaning of the nooses, or the legacy of racism, slavery and Jim Crow in the rural south. Instead, the Parish's district attorney told protesting Black students that he could take away their lives, "with a stroke of my pen." He then proceeded to attempt to do just that, charging six students with attempted murder after a schoolyard fight later that year.

In the nine months since their children were charged with attempted murder, the family members of the Jena Six organized meetings, hosted rallies, sent out press releases and letters and made phone calls – whatever they could think of. They were determined to not let this stand. For months, they stood nearly alone, accompanied by solidarity visits from activists from nearby towns and cities in Louisiana and Texas. Many of their friends and neighbors were afraid to speak out, and some reported having their jobs threatened. One white couple who spoke out said they felt pressured to leave town. But, in the face of what seemed like overwhelming obstacles, and with no organizing experience or friends in high places, the people of Jena continued to struggle. After months of silence from the media and from mainstream civil rights organizations, the first media stories began appearing, which were widely forwarded by mail, and amplified by homemade videos. After Mychal Bell's conviction at the end of June, and stories on Democracy Now and in the Final Call newspaper, support started growing exponentially, with hundreds of letters bringing tens of thousands of dollars in donations. By September, it became a movement that even the corporate media could not ignore.

At 5:00am, the buses were already arriving. A full bus from Chicago emptied out, some people brushing their teeth as they stepped into the slightly cold pre-dawn air. They seemed exhausted, but also charged and energized. Next came buses from Baton Rouge, Los Angeles and Philadelphia. By 7:00am, reports were coming in that hundreds of buses were lined up outside of town, some having been briefly prevented by State police from entering. Meanwhile, hundreds of people, from cars and buses and motorcycles, were pouring into Jena,

while many thousands more were gathering in the streets outside the Jena courthouse. As simultaneous rallies began in the two locations, thousands of more people streamed into the city. By 9:00am, there were, by some estimates, up to 50,000 people in this town of 2,500. Almost every business in town was shut down, many roads were closed by police checkpoints, and a sea of protest filled the city for miles.

This demonstration was not initiated by any one national organization, and there was little coordination between some of the major organizations involved. The initial call came from the families themselves, and most people had heard about the demonstration through local Black radio stations, especially on syndicated shows like the Michael Baisden and Steve Harvey shows, as well as through blogs and youtube (one activist-made youtube video, recommended by Baisden, has already been seen well over a million times) as well as on social networking sites like myspace. As Howard Witt has pointed out in the Chicago Tribune, "Jackson, Sharpton and other big-name civil rights figures, far from leading this movement, have had to scramble to catch up. So, too, has the national media, which has only recently noticed a story that has been agitating many black Americans for months."

This decentralization was beautiful, although sometimes chaotic. As thousands gathered at the rally at the ball field, which was sponsored by the NAACP, thousands more demonstrators marched from the courthouse to the Jena High School, and tens of thousands continued to arrive and fill the streets around downtown Jena. Because this movement was without central leadership, there were many agendas, and also some confusion, as people were unsure when the march began, or if there was a march, and also unsure about parallel events, such as an afternoon hiphop concert at the ball field, which was mostly attended by people from the local community. People seemed unconcerned about the lack of clarity, however, and marched on their own schedule, which led to a more democratic feel to the day, unlike the more controlled, and sometimes disempowering, marches that some mainstream groups have organized in the past.

The t-shirts on display reflected the lack of central control – every community had made their own t-shirt, literally hundreds of variations on the theme of Free The Jena Six, many personalized to reflect their school or community. Hours of speakers delivered messages of solidarity and calls to action, from Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson to performers such as Mos Def and Sunni Patterson, while the enormous crowds marched and chanted, and also simply basked in a truly historic outpouring of activism. Participants varied from children and teens at their first demonstration to civil rights movement veterans. Many people who had never before been to a demonstration ended up organizing a delegation or booking a bus for this journey.

While the vast majority of the white community of Jena chose to stay either indoors or out of town, hundreds of Black Jena residents

proudly displayed their "Free The Jena Six" shirts, and continued to gather in the ball field hours after most out of town visitors had left. White activists from across the US also largely stayed away from this historic event – perhaps 1 to 3 percent of the crowd was white, in what amounts to a disturbing silence from the white left and liberals. This silence indicates that the US Left is divided by race in many of the same ways this country is.

Yesterday's march, however, was not about division. It was a generational moment – the kind of watershed event that could signal a turning point in our movements. But what does the gigantic crowd in Jena mean? For some supporters, it felt like a fulfillment of those months that the families stood alone – a moment where the world stood with them, and the power structure backed down. In the last week Mychal Bell's convictions have been overturned, and most of the other students saw their charges lessened. Yesterday was also a moment for grassroots independent media, who built this story, and kept it alive until the 24 hour news channels could no longer ignore it. It was a moment for historically black colleges and universities to shine - Student activists organized bus convoys – five or more buses arrived from many southern schools - which were quickly filled by a broad range of students.

Yesterday was a moment for the unaffiliated left, for people everywhere concerned about a criminal justice system that has locked up two million and keeps growing. It was a moment for those concerned about school systems in the US, and especially the policing of our schools, what activists have called the School to Prison Pipeline. It was a moment for those that feel that the US has still not dealt with our history of slavery and Jim Crow, and our present realities of white supremacy. Perhaps that is where the power in yesterday's demonstration lies; if this undirected and uncontrolled outrage can be directed towards real societal change, if outrages like Jena can finally bring about the conversation on race in this country that we were promised after Katrina, if this united movement to support these six kids can show that we can unite for justice and win, then Jena will truly have been a victory.

As writer Andre Banks <<http://writewhatilike.typepad.com/>> asked yesterday, "What would happen if every person who wore a t-shirt today or handed out a flyer or wrote a blog post woke up tomorrow and looked for the Mychal Bell in their own backyard? He, or she, won't be hard to find. What if our outrage, today directed at the small Louisiana town of Jena, extended to parallel injustices in Detroit or Cincinnati or Sacramento or Miami? What if we viewed this mobilization not as the end of a successful, innovative campaign, but as the moment that catalyzes us into broader and deeper action in every place where we are?" If this happens, we can say that it all began with six families in Jena, Louisiana, who refused to stay silent.

Jordan Flaherty

Jordan Flaherty is an editor of [Left Turn Magazine](http://www.leftturn.org), a journal of grassroots resistance. His May 9, 2007 article from Jena was one of the first to bring the case to a national audience. His previous articles from Jena are online at <http://www.leftturn.org>. To contact Jordan,

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Post-scriptum :

Resources:

New York Collective of Radical Educators (NYCoRE) and Network of Teacher Activist Groups (TAG) have developed: Revealing Racist Roots: The 3 R's for Teaching About the Jena 6, a curriculum guide for teachers to address what's happening in Jena. Download the resource guide in PDF Version or Word Version for free at: www.nycore.org OR www.t4sj.org.