

Thousands protest in Jena

Washington Continent

By Staff

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MONROE, LA - Thousands of people, including contingents of college students from Washington, D.C. New York City, Houston, Texas, Jackson, Miss., arrived in Jena, La., to press for justice for six Black high school students, now known as the Jena Six, who face criminal charges for a school yard brawl with white students.

The crowd included 50 students from Howard University.

The Jena Six were expelled from school, arrested and charged with second-degree attempted murder. Supporters of the Jena Six dubbed the event the National day of Action. Thousands descended upon Jena to participate in a rally and march, organized by the Rev. Al Sharpton, to help secure justice for the black students.

Among the groups who supported the rally were the Nation of Islam, New Black Panther Party, ACLU, ColorofChange.org, The Final Call Newspaper, The Community Defender, NAACP, Left Turn Magazine, Louisiana Justice Institute, Interfaith Worker Justice, People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, Common Ground Health Clinic, The Michael Baisden Show, Malcolm X Grassroots, Families and Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children, INCITE Women of Color against Violence, Advocates for Environmental Human Rights, and many more.

Numerous published accounts have appeared in newspapers around the country and in the foreign press of the Jena Six story, which recalls the Jim Crow era when white judges, lawyers and all-white juries.

Several racially charged incidents began last fall after two black high school students sat beneath a tree in the school yard where whites normally congregated. One black student reportedly had asked the principal for permission to sit beneath the tree and was told he could sit wherever he wanted to sit. So he did. The next day three nooses were found hanging from the tree. After the superintendent declared that the nooses were a just "prank" more black students sat under the tree in protest. Then the District Attorney went to Jena High School and during an assembly singled out the black students, demanding that the protest end and telling them "I can be your best friend or your worst enemy...I can take away your lives with a stroke of my pen."

What followed was a series of white on black incidents of violence over the next couple of months. On November 30 the main academic building at Jena High School

was burned down. It is still unknown how it started. Later that week a white student beat up a black student at a party.

The next day a young white man with a shotgun threatened black students at a convenience store. They wrestled the gun from him and ran away. No charges were filed against the white man, but the black students were later arrested for theft of the gun.

The following Monday at school, a white student who had verbally supported the students who hung the nooses, taunted the black student who had been beaten up at the off-campus party and allegedly used a racial slur against several black students. After lunch the black students knocked him down, punched and kicked him. Although the white student was taken to the hospital, he was released and was well enough to go to a social event that evening.

The DA had taken no action until a white student was beaten up in a schoolyard fight. The noose-hanging incident and the DA's visit to the school set the stage for everything that followed. The DA charged the six black students with attempted murder and conspiracy to commit murder: They were Robert Bailey, 17, Theo Shaw, 17, Carwin Jones, 18, Bryant Purvis, 17, Mychal Bell, 16 and an unidentified minor. Bail was set between \$70,000 and \$138,000, so high that the boys had to remain in prison for months as their families went deep into debt to release them.

Bell was tried as an adult and convicted by an all white jury of aggravated battery and conspiracy to commit aggravated battery, both felonies. During his trial the public defender called no witnesses, his parents were ordered not to speak to the media, and the court prohibited protests from taking place near the courtroom or within the eyesight of the judge.

Mychal, who has been in prison since December, was scheduled to be sentenced on July 31, but an Appeals Court threw out his conviction. He could have been sentenced to 22 years.

This account is based, in part on a report by the colorofchange.org.

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