

African American Tennessee Lawmakers Reinstated to State House by Local Authorities

A national campaign in support of Justine Pearson and Justin Jones resulted in them retaking their seats as representatives of the people of Nashville and Memphis.

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Two African American state representatives to the Tennessee House of Representatives have been returned to the Capitol in Nashville by the local councils in Nashville and Memphis.

The expulsions by the supermajority Republican-dominated state legislative body highlighted the problems of democratic governance and institutional racism in the United States.

Justin Pearson and Justin Jones were involved in a demonstration on March 30 which demanded the passage of gun control legislation in the state of Tennessee. Protesters entered the Capitol building while the two reinstated elected officials spoke through bullhorns in support of the manifestation.

A third Democratic state representative, Gloria Johnson of Knoxville, who is white, was spared expulsion by only one vote. Johnson stood in solidarity with Pearson and Jones even after they were voted out by the Republican-dominated House on April 6.

The demonstration in Nashville was prompted by a massacre at the Covenant School located in the same municipality. The deaths of six people including three children follows a pattern of violence which stems from the deeply troubled character of U.S. society in the current period.

Guns are manufactured by an armaments industry which wields tremendous influence domestically and internationally. This factor combined with the failure to reinvest the enormous profits from capitalist corporations into healthcare, education, housing, environmental quality and other essentials of modern life, has contributed to the

widespread sense of insecurity and societal instability.

Jones was ordered back to Nashville just days after his expulsion for participation in the demonstration and defying the general right-wing consensus in Tennessee and nationally which acquiescence to the profit motives of the armament industry. The proliferation of weapons inside the U.S. is paralleled by the large-scale arms exports to other geopolitical regions around the world.

Conservative politicians are routinely opposed to any safeguards on the distribution of even assault weapons. The response by the Tennessee Assembly was to draft legislation aimed at placing more armed guards in schools. Jones and Pearson objected to this approach saying such legislation would further the militarization of educational institutions.

Just one day after the expulsion of the two state representatives, the Nashville Metropolitan Council voted to reinstate Jones. He returned to his office at the Capitol the following day.

Pearson, who represents areas in Memphis, was reinstated on April 12 by the Shelby County Board of Commissioners in a 7-0 vote with only Democratic Party members present in the session. He returned to Nashville on April 13 where he was sworn back into his position outside the building.

After the swearing-in ceremony, Pearson told the crowd and the press that:

“There will be a new building of this building, with a foundation built on love. With pillars of justice rising up. With rafters of courage covering us. With doors that are open to everybody in the state of Tennessee. Not just rich somebodies, but everybody. Not just straight somebodies, but everybody. Not just Republican somebodies, but everybody.” (See [this](#))

The Movement Continues for African American Democratic Rights

The return of the two African Americans to their elected seats in Nashville represented a tremendous victory for the people of the state concerned about more than just the issue of gun control. There are other important questions which tend to accompany advocacy of the Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. The Bill of Rights to the Constitution were first enacted during the era of antebellum enslavement of African people. Consequently, the repeated reference to this inherent right harkens back to the total suppression of African people by law.

There are bills being deliberated in the State Assembly during this session which are designed to slash the Nashville City Council by 50%. In addition, legislation is being proposed to undermine the efforts aimed at police reforms to curb brutality in urban areas such as Memphis, Knoxville and Nashville.

Overall, there is a movement among conservatives to erase the legacy of struggle waged by African Americans, women and other oppressed peoples out of the historical memory. The developments in Tennessee over the last few weeks illustrate clearly that the quest for civil rights, full equality and self-determination is far from concluded.

Rep. Jones was quoted after the 36-0 vote by the Metropolitan Council of Nashville emphasizing:

“Today we are sending a resounding message that democracy will not be killed in the comfort of silence. Today we send a clear message to Speaker Cameron Sexton that the people will not allow his crimes against democracy to happen without challenge.” (See [this](#))

Even with these actions by the local councils in Memphis and Nashville, the reappointments of Pearson and Jones are temporary until a special election is held. The state representatives only took office at the beginning of the year. Judging from the support they received from their local elected officials, there should not be any difficulty in them winning reelection.

Nonetheless, the Republican supermajority remains recalcitrant in their political actions which negatively impact African Americans in Tennessee. In any article published by the [Vox.com news website](#) it points out:

“GOP members have said they would recognize Jones and Pearson as members if they are reelected. In Tennessee, lawmakers also can’t be expelled for the same offense for a second time. ‘If after looking at [Jones’s] conduct, they vote he come back, we will recognize him as a representative,’ Rep. Gino Bulso, one of the Republicans who introduced the expulsion resolutions, told the Tennessean.”

In other words, until a special election is held, and the African American legislators are returned, will the Republicans make a decision as to whether to acknowledge their presence in the state house. Such an attitude is reflective of the pattern of institutional racism and undemocratic practice within the state of Tennessee.

The same above-mentioned Vox.com report on the return to their offices by Jones and Pearson emphasizes:

“As Vox’s Zack Beauchamp noted, data suggests Tennessee was already the least democratic state in the U.S. ahead of the expulsions. That same data found that GOP control of a state led to an increased embrace of anti-democratic tendencies. And those trends have some pro-democracy advocates — including the three Democratic lawmakers — concerned the Tennessee GOP’s actions may inspire other Republican-dominant legislatures to use their power to penalize or remove those who they don’t agree with. The removals were also only the latest action by the Republican-dominated Tennessee legislature that restricted Black political power in the state.”

Only Mass Struggle Can Effectively Challenge the Racist System

These antidemocratic tendencies have enormous implications for the status, health and well-being of African Americans and other Tennesseans as a whole. As the growth in the populations of Black, Brown, Asian, Indigenous and other People of Color communities in the urban areas of the U.S. continues, there will be even more draconian attacks on the fundamental notions of universal suffrage and representative government on the local, state and national levels.

Pearson began his activism as a student when he protested the inadequacy of textbooks in high school. After being reappointed by the Shelby County Commission, he addressed a group of students assembled to attend the important hearing.

The state rep. was interviewed by [Chalkbeat](#), an educational news website, saying that he believed the youth of today would address the recurrent problems of injustice in U.S.

society. He told Chalkbeat:

“Students and young people lead all movements. This movement is no different, and the movement to end gun violence and the justice that we will have will be because of young people and students and college students who say that the status quo must change.”

Whether these issues can and will be discussed in Tennessee classrooms is still in question as legislation has been passed to restrict the teaching of the actual history of the state and the country in general. Nashville and Memphis have been centers of popular and labor struggles going back to the 19th and 20th centuries which have shaped the current political situation today. Undoubtedly, the Southern states will continue to be a terrain in the struggle over the future of the U.S.

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