

Two African American State Representatives Expelled by Tennessee Republican Majority

Both were involved in a demonstration at the Capitol building in Nashville demanding stronger gun control laws after a mass shooting in the same municipality

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Global Research, April 10, 2023

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Law and Justice](#)

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*Tennessee State Representatives **Justin Jones** and **Justin J. Pearson** were expelled by the Republican supermajority in Nashville on April 6.*

Another state house member, **Gloria Johnson**, who is white, survived the expulsion attempt by only one vote.

The three were accused of violating the rules of the Tennessee state legislature just days after holding an impromptu demonstration inside the Capitol building demanding the adoption of a gun control bill. The protests which took place inside and outside the building was in response to the mass shooting at The Covenant School where six people were killing including three children.

Within the United States any mention of curtailing the purchase and proliferation of weapons is countered by notions of Second Amendment rights embodied in the Constitution. The arms industry remains a huge source of profits for manufacturers. Consequently, Republicans and many Democrats within state and federal governance bodies have consistently refused to put in place solid background checks and psychological evaluations.

Jones, Pearson and Johnson remained defiant even after the expulsion votes were taken. Immediately, the two African American elected officials had their names removed from the State of Tennessee website. Their keys were deactivated while they lost access to their offices and staff members.

Members of the Tennessee Black Caucus expressed their outrage in response to the actions taken by the right-wing dominated state legislature. Their anger was shared by the Congressional Black Caucus in the House of Representatives. Vice-President Kamala Harris

flew into Nashville on April 7 to hold discussions with the ousted Representatives Johnson and Pearson.

One of the expelled officials. Rep. Justin Jones was quoted as saying, “They’re expelling me today, but they can’t expel our movement.” Rep. Pearson also said, “This is wrong, this is unjust and this not the way it has to be.” (See [this](#))

On April 7, an article published by a local Nashville television station gaged the attitude among other African American state legislators quoting some of them as saying that:

“I’m asking folks, who are mad, to stay mad,’ said Rep. Sam McKenzie, the Chairman of the Tennessee Black Caucus and a Democrat from Knoxville. ‘It looked like a Jim Crow-era trial. We saw two Black men fighting for their careers, fighting for their reputations, fighting for their political lives,’ said Rep. Jesse Chism, the Vice Chairman and a Democrat from Memphis. House Minority Leader Karen Camper claimed Pearson and Jones received different treatment. ‘Looking at two Black men expelled, and the white woman’s still here. America is watching, and I asked them to be on the right side of history. They decided not to. That is their actions,’ said Camper, who is also a Democrat from Memphis.”

State Rep. Johnson from Knoxville continued to stand with Pearson and Jones as they were forced to leave the Capitol building. Johnson is a retired schoolteacher and reflected on her experience having witnessed the traumatizing impact on children when a shooting took place at the school where she worked.

Rep. Johnson was asked why she survived the purge that befell Jones and Pearson. She immediately said that it has a lot to do with the color of our skin. Johnson deplored the racist treatment meted out against the two young African American elected officials.

There is much discussion about how Jones and Pearson can regain their seats at the State Capitol in Nashville. The local authorities in Memphis and Nashville where elected officials are based could recommend that they be reseated until the governor calls for a special election.

Rep. Chism said that the expulsion harkens back to the days of legalized segregation, popularly known as Jim Crow. The Vice-Chair of the Black Caucus emphasized:

“The scene was so disheartening, specifically as we were walking Representative Jones out of the chamber. Many of us were fighting back tears. And when we went back into the chamber, many of our tears broke. And it was a shame to see some of the smirks, some of the smiles that some of our colleagues on the other side of the aisle had as they saw our tears.” (See [this](#))

During the 1880s a Similar Fate Impacted African American Legislators in Tennessee

All of the news reports on developments in Tennessee claim that the expulsion of Jones and Pearson were rare occasions in the history of the state. They recount other removals of officials in recent years for misconduct.

Unlike in some other states such as Mississippi there were African Americans elected to

serve in the U.S. House of Representatives and the Senate during the 1870s, in Tennessee there was Black representation only at the State Capitol in Nashville and at the local levels. Altogether 16 African Americans served in the House of Representatives and the Senate in Washington D.C.

Nonetheless, beginning in 1872, 13 African Americans were elected to the state legislature largely from counties in the southwest region of the state where there had been a concentration of cotton production utilizing enslaved labor prior to the Civil War. Most of these officials were elected during the 1880s as Republicans. These electoral victories by African Americans occurred on a state level even after the collapse of Federal Reconstruction as a result of the disputed presidential elections of 1876.

Many of the African Americans elected during this period were forced from their counties or eventually denied their seats within the state legislature. State Rep. David F. Rivers (1859-1941) was elected by voters in Fayette County at the age of 23. After serving his first term in 1883-1884, he was violently driven out of Fayette County after winning re-election for the 1885-1886 term of office. (See [this](#))

In regard to the last three African Americans to serve in the State Assembly, one account notes the following:

“A shrewd and spirited Chattanooga attorney, Styles L. Hutchins was elected to represent Hamilton County in the 45th Tennessee General Assembly, 1887-1888. Hutchins and his two colleagues in the House, Monroe Gooden and Samuel McElwee, were the last African Americans to serve in the state legislature until A. W. Willis Jr. of Memphis took his seat in the House of Representatives in January 1965, nearly 80 years later.” (See [this](#))

There was one other African American elected to the Tennessee State Assembly, however, he was denied the right to take his seat in Nashville. Jesse M.H. Graham of Montgomery County entered politics with significant support from his constituency.

According to an historical account of Graham:

“A Republican teacher, postal worker, and newspaper editor, Jesse M. H. Graham was elected in early November 1896 to represent Montgomery County in the 50th Tennessee General Assembly, 1897-1898. He was not only the first African American chosen to represent Montgomery County, but also the first Republican representative elected in that district since Reconstruction – reportedly by ‘the largest vote ever cast for a legislative candidate’ in the county (Freeman, November 28, 1896). Jesse Graham seemed to be unstoppable until November 15, 1896, when the Louisville Courier-Journal reported that he had lived in Louisville until October 1895, not only holding a job there, but also registering and voting as a Kentucky resident. His opponent promptly called attention to the three-year residency requirement outlined in the Tennessee state constitution and challenged Graham’s eligibility to hold office. He was provisionally seated on January 4, 1897, while the Committee on Elections debated the issue. On January 20, 1897, after the committee declared both Graham and his opponent ineligible, the General Assembly passed a resolution, by a vote of 76-0 (with 23 not voting), declaring the seat vacant. Ten days later, in a lackluster election that ‘appeared to elicit little interest’ among either city or county voters, Montgomery County elected Democrat John Baggett to the seat. According to several newspaper reports, the

General Assembly soon passed a bill blocking the election of Black candidates. It is undeniably true that no other African Americans were elected to the General Assembly from any county in Tennessee until 1964.” (See [this](#))

A National Pattern of Institutionalized Racist Attacks

It is quite obvious that overt forms of racism and national oppression are intensifying in the U.S. with legislation passed in several states restricting the right to vote. These state laws will undoubtedly have a disproportionate impact on African Americans, Latin Americans and other People of Color communities.

The efforts to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential elections by leading politicians and operatives of the Republican Party are indicative of the revisions imposed by some state governance structures to restrict participation at the polls. These legislative and judicial assaults on universal suffrage have parallels within the education sectors.

In Florida under Republican Governor Ron DeSantis, laws have been passed which prohibit the teaching of the actual history of the U.S. by denying the existence of African American national oppression during enslavement and Jim Crow. The heroic struggles during the Civil Rights and Black Power movements are considered incendiary and therefore excluded from the curriculums. These legislative attacks are extending to higher education as an additional bill under consideration is aimed at removing African American Studies.

African Americans and their allies will heighten the campaigns against the rising levels of racism and intolerance. These contradictions within the body politic of the U.S. will further weaken its capacity to maintain any semblance of unity and social stability.

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