

Arrest made in connection with church burnings in Louisiana

Aaron Murch
12 April 2019

Three historically black churches in St. Landry Parish, in south-central Louisiana, have been set on fire in a span of ten days. On Wednesday, April 10, Holden Matthews, the 21-year-old son of a St. Landry sheriff's deputy, was arrested as the suspected arsonist behind the fires.

The string of arsons began on March 26 in the town of Port Barre, where the St. Mary Baptist Church burned down under suspicious circumstances. One week later, in nearby Opelousas, two more churches caught fire, the Greater Union Baptist Church on April 2 and the Mount Pleasant Baptist Church two days later.

The churches were empty at the time of the fires and no injuries have been reported, but given the region's dark history of racist attacks by whites against black churches local parishioners were concerned about a possible racial motivation behind the burnings.

The Democratic governor of Louisiana, John Bel Edwards, gave a press conference laying out the tone of the investigation: "I don't know what this young man's motive was, I don't know what was in his heart, but I can say it cannot be justified or rationalized," Edwards said, "It has been especially painful because it reminds us of a very dark past of intimidation and fear."

According to the latest Census data, St. Landry Parish, west of Baton Rouge, is home to over 83,000 people. Located in the heart of Louisiana's Cajun and Creole community St. Landry's population is about 56 percent white and 42 percent black. Holden Matthews is white.

Given that the churches targeted were historically black—St. Mary's in particular has been around for 126 years as an African American Baptist Church—the Southern Poverty Law Center is classifying these

burnings as a hate crime. The sheriff's department has not explicitly declared the burnings a hate crime and prosecutors have not yet brought hate crime charges, which carry with them harsher sentences.

According to authorities, Matthews' truck was caught on camera leaving one of the churches and a specifically branded gas can used in the burnings was found in his possession.

While it is unclear if racial hatred was a major motivating factor, Matthews, a musician in a local metal band, has made comments on Facebook praising black metal artists known for burning churches in Norway in the early 90s. According to his profile Matthews is a fan of "black metal," a subgenre of hard rock, which in some areas has attracted advocates of white nationalism and neo-Nazi ideologies.

Matthews' father Roy Matthews is a deputy at the local sheriff's department but was not involved in the investigation. He claimed he was unaware of his son's activities and did not know of any racist bias his son may have had.

The New Orleans division of the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms led the investigation into the attacks, claiming to advocate a "zero tolerance" approach to the case. "These were evil acts," Governor Edwards said at the news conference.

The NAACP called the burnings "domestic terrorism" and part of a supposed upsurge in racist sentiment across the country, although there is no indication of any widespread support for either Matthews' racist views or his actions.

Whatever his motives in the church burnings, and their connection to far-right, neo-Nazi ideology, Matthews' actions are a warning sign of a greater social crisis in a region which is impoverished and has had public education virtually gutted in recent decades

under both Republican and Democratic leadership.

The Lafayette area has itself seen a steady decline in good paying manufacturing and oil jobs over the years. In St. Landry Parish the most common job available is custodian, at extremely low pay.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact