

Why are reparations for slavery being made an issue in the 2020 US elections?

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A contentious hearing was held Wednesday before the US House Judiciary Committee on a bill, H.R. 40, that would establish a congressional commission to study and consider a national apology and reparations for slavery and succeeding racial and economic discrimination against African Americans.

The bill, sponsored by Democratic Representative Sheila Jackson Lee from Houston, Texas, was first introduced by the former Congressman John Conyers in 1989 and at every annual session since for nearly three decades. Wednesday, however, marked the first time that a bill relating to reparations for slavery was considered by the full committee.

Despite the widespread coverage in the media, including front page and op-ed treatment in the *New York Times*, there is no mass upswell of popular sentiment for reparations. In fact, a 2018 poll found that just 26 percent of Americans supported monetary reparations for the descendants of slaves.

At a time when social inequality is driving a growing movement of workers and youth, the issue is being deliberately promoted by the Democratic Party to inject racial divisions into the heart of the 2020 election campaign.

The formation of a commission has been co-sponsored by Tulsi Gabbard, Eric Swalwell and Tim Ryan, three of the four current Democratic Representatives running for the party's presidential nomination. The bill also has the backing of Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren and New Jersey Senator Cory Booker, both presidential candidates. Booker was the first person to testify at Wednesday's hearing.

The panel included a cross section of privileged, upper-middle class African Americans, from author Ta-Nehisi Coates, a strong supporter of Barack Obama who spoke out in favor of reparations, to retired American football player Burgess Owens, who used his time to oppose reparations from the far-right, delivering a screed denouncing socialism and Marxism.

The call for reparations raises complex political and historical questions that are nowhere addressed by any of

those taking up the demand.

With no living survivors of the “peculiar institution” of chattel slavery, it is impossible to place it in the framework of legal reparations. How would such reparations be paid and by whom? By the direct descendants of slave holders? Only by those who had ancestors living in the US during the period of slavery? By all whites? Or would it be extracted from society as a whole?

By what mechanism, moreover, would it be established who is eligible to receive reparations for slavery? Since race has no biological foundation, would the proponents of reparations return to the racist “one drop” rule that prevailed in the south to determine who is black? Or would they object to paying reparations to the many Americans with African slave ancestors who identify as white, and therefore presumably benefit from “white privilege”?

Moreover, why limit reparations to African Americans? The story of the United States is one of countless tragedies and historical injustices affecting every segment of the working class, from the Irish, Chinese and Germans to Italians and Jews. And of course, there are the many tribes of Native Americans, who had their land stolen and treaties with the federal government routinely broken. With many today still living on remote reservations, they suffer rates of poverty and police violence higher than African Americans.

Proponents of reparations transform race into the fundamental category that is the essential framework for understanding all American history. Chattel slavery is seen as just one episode in an enduring reign of “white supremacy,” which was simply continued after the Civil War in another form of racial oppression, Jim Crow segregation and housing discrimination, and continues in the current period with mass incarceration.

In fact, slavery was a system of socio-economic exploitation, with a global reach, stretching from the heart of the African continent to the sugar plantations of the Caribbean and the dockyards of Great Britain. It was abolished in the United States more than 150 years ago after a monumental civil war, the Second American Revolution.

Those promoting reparations display a complete indifference to the actual historical experience. They ignore and dismiss the significance of the Civil War, in which the working class played a critical role. The hundreds of thousands who paid for the bondsmen's freedom with their lives were overwhelmingly white, motivated by an ideological and political struggle against slavery.

It was understood by the most advanced political thinkers at the time that there was a fundamental connection between the development of a working-class movement against capitalism and the elimination of slavery. Karl Marx noted in *Capital*: "[E]very independent movement of the workers was paralyzed so long as slavery disfigured a part of the Republic. Labor cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded."

In the aftermath of the Civil War, the oppression of African Americans was linked to the development of modern capitalism and the class struggle. Racism was consciously stoked by the elites and demagogues to divide white and black workers. Campaigns of terrorism and lynchings were carried out by groups such as the Ku Klux Klan to enforce divisions between black and white workers and tenant farmers.

The Civil Rights movement developed in the 1950s and 1960s as a mass movement, uniting blacks and whites, in the fight for the enforcement of legal equality for all. At the end of his life, one of the leaders of that movement, Martin Luther King, Jr., called for a Poor Peoples March to demand economic justice for all, regardless of race.

However, in the half century since the end of the Civil Rights movement, there has been an enormous effort, led by the Democratic Party, to separate the social issues that confront African American workers from the working class as a whole. The result of policies such as Affirmative Action has been a social disaster for those at the bottom and the enrichment of a tiny layer of black millionaires and billionaires.

The fundamental dividing line in American society—and world capitalism as a whole—is class, not race, nationality or gender. The reparations bill refers to the fact that African Americans have "an unemployment rate more than twice the current white unemployment rate; and an average of less than 1/16 of the wealth of white families, a disparity which has worsened, not improved over time." It says nothing, however, of the class disparity among African Americans, or among whites. Never has the wealth gap between rich and working-class blacks been greater, and the same goes for everyone else, regardless of skin color.

The basic issues confronting African American workers—unemployment, poverty, debt, attacks on wages and health care, police violence, war—are the issues confronting

all workers, white and black, immigrant and native born. Under these conditions, to propose that a social program be developed to benefit one or another ethnicity is repugnant.

The demand for monetary reparations has the unpleasant odor of a financial scam. Figures like Coates and Booker do not speak for the working class, but for a layer of the upper middle class who are seeking to effect a more equitable distribution of wealth at the top of society. If a racial reparations program ever did get passed through Congress, one can be certain that it would only benefit upper middle class African Americans and leave workers scrounging for crumbs from the table.

It has, moreover, the clear character of a political scam. Under conditions of growing class struggle internationally, its purpose is to divide workers against each other and preserve the social and economic system, capitalism, that is at the root of all the ills, including racism, confronting the working class as a whole. In this regard, it serves a similar function as Trump's fascistic appeals to anti-immigrant chauvinism.

The Socialist Equality Party does not support reparations. It fights for the unity of the working class in the struggle for genuine equality. The vast wealth monopolized by the rich must be expropriated, and the giant corporations turned into democratically controlled utilities, run on the basis of social need, not private profit. This is the fight for socialism, in the United States and around the world.



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