

Evanston, Illinois city council votes to enact racial reparations program

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26 March 2021

On Monday, the city council of Evanston, a lakefront suburb bordering Chicago to the north, voted to pass a housing plan which is being hailed as the first municipal effort to make reparations payments to African Americans anywhere in the United States.

Evanston's reparations plan, like other such schemes that have been floated or are currently being introduced at the local and national level, is reactionary in its attempt to divide the working class on racial lines, and moreover, will do nothing to address the deep poverty and inequality suffered by black workers.

Passing the council by an 8–1 margin, the Local Reparations Restorative Housing Program, promises to allocate a mere \$400,000 to black residents in amounts of up to \$25,000. Any funds distributed must be used on housing, either for mortgage payments, down payments on new homes or on home improvements. In other words, the program could benefit as few as 16 households in a city whose population is about 75,000, of whom approximately 16 percent, or around 12,000, are black.

In a bid to present the program as an attempt to redress past wrongs, the Evanston plan is aimed at black or African American residents who lived in the suburb between 1919 and 1969, as well as their direct descendants. Those who “experienced housing discrimination due to the City’s policies/practices after 1969” are able to apply but will likely face increased scrutiny of their applications.

Like all plans to apportion social benefits on the basis of race, a concept with no biological foundation, the Evanston program, consciously or unconsciously, reproduces the old racist “one drop” rule to determine eligibility. As a memorandum on the plan from the city notes, “For the Program’s purposes, African-American/Black is defined as having origins in any of the Black racial and ethnic groups of Africa.”

Despite the publicly stated goal of addressing past

discrimination in the housing market that has left its mark in lower home ownership rates and wealth among black households, the limited scope of the program ensures the limited funds will primarily be of benefit to more well-off layers who already own homes or who are able to qualify for mortgages. Demand for housing in Evanston, home of the elite Northwestern University, has seen prices increase well beyond the reach of many workers. According to the Redfin website, the median sale price for all residential properties in Evanston, including condominiums, is currently \$335,250.

The lone vote against the reparations plan came from alderwoman Cicely Fleming, a long-time proponent of reparations for slavery, due to her belief that the current plan, which she has described as “a housing plan dressed up,” does not qualify, and is, additionally, paternalistic in its requirement that funds be used on housing. In a statement she made at the city council meeting explaining her “no” vote, Fleming said, “We can talk more about the program details, but I reject the very definition of this as a ‘reparations’ program. Until the structure and terms are in the hands of the people—we have missed the mark.”

Fleming and others, including a group calling itself Evanston Rejects Racist Reparations, are especially worried that despite claims this program is merely a first step, that it will in fact become a model for “reparations” across the country. This is actually a quite likely outcome, in which funds ostensibly aimed at reducing wealth inequality are funneled back to the banks, housing developers and other wealthy capitalist interests largely responsible for perpetuating racial wealth disparities in the first place.

The financial basis for the Evanston reparations plan is a decision in 2019 to allocate the first \$10 million in regressive tax revenue it receives from legalized cannabis sales toward reparations. Even if one were to assume a doubling of the \$400,000 outlay in future years, or an

increase to \$1 million, the number of families that could be helped by such a program rises only to 40. By way of comparison, the Evanston poverty rate is 13.5 percent, meaning around 10,000 people of all races live below the miserly poverty line, while many more live just above it.

The real reason for the push forward with reparations stems from the broader Democratic Party initiative to make race central to every political issue and to prevent workers from unifying on a class basis and advancing demands that would benefit the working class as a whole.

This was made clear in recent remarks by Chicago alderman Jason Ervin, a Democrat, who attacked a Chicago City Council resolution advocating the city spend \$30 million to pilot a universal basic income (UBI) program. Ervin, chair of the city council's Black Caucus, denounced the idea of UBI when it was brought up, saying, "Until we deal with the issue of reparations in the city of Chicago, there's no way in hell we can support direct payments to anybody other than the American descendants of slaves in the city of Chicago."

Continuing his denunciation of UBI, Ervin claimed, "These conversations are a slap in the face to people that have suffered great atrocities over time in this country. ... We have all these conversations about other communities. But when it comes down to dealing with Black folks—not only in the city of Chicago but in America—we're always in the back seat."

The radical-sounding UBI is not a socialist policy but Ervin's attack on the very idea that white (and other) workers might receive some kind of social assistance is completely reactionary and indicates the upper middle class social layers for which he speaks. The only way to address the poverty and inequality suffered by workers of all races is to reject such racist policies with the contempt they deserve, and fight for socialist policies on a class basis.



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