

California's reparations task force limits potential recipients to those who can prove lineage

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In June of 2021, the state of California initiated a “Reparations Task Force” to consider questions of compensation for the descendants of the victims of chattel slavery. The task force is to report to the state legislature in June of 2023 to make recommendations.

It is significant that the demand finds its home in California, of all states. The demand for reparations has been consistently rejected at the national level, but its proponents have found support here. In the antebellum, California deported runaway slaves back to the South, but it nonetheless remained a free state. Its government opposed the expansion of slavery into the state and supported the Union in the Civil War. When the reparations task force was kicked off in mid-2021, California Secretary of State Shirley Weber asked, “Why in California? Why not somewhere else? Why did we not do it in the South? If not us, then who?”

Good questions, but to give them a serious answer requires an analysis of contemporary political reality, not rhetorical self-aggrandizement. A hint is given in the latest decision by the task force that only those who identify as African American and can prove the enslavement of their ancestors or the presence of a free black ancestor in the US prior to the 20th century can receive a payout.

In a motion that passed 5-4, they stated that eligibility would be “determined by an individual being an African American descendant of a chattel enslaved person or the descendant of a free Black person living in the US prior to the end of the 19th century.” This criterion excludes black African immigrants—of which there are more than 300,000 in California and 2 million in the US—and those who do not identify as African American but can prove slave or free black ancestors.

The question of eligibility is not a minor question. The

task force is after all expected to quantify the amount of money owed as part of its work, and the total sum may be substantial. Who will receive it is a chief concern. A number of genealogists were brought to speak to the task force about the issues of using a lineage based approach, some of whom raised important points. In particular, one warned that proving one’s heritage could be “time consuming and costly.”

It should be added that in such a formulation, there is more than a whiff of one of the most reactionary laws of the 20th century. Those who wish to receive reparations must demonstrate as a sort of pseudo-progressive contrapositive to the “one-drop rule” that they are descended from slaves. That criterion, infamous during the Jim Crow period, classified people as “black” if they could be shown to have a single drop of “black blood” in them. In its day, this was used to cast as wide a net as possible. Even those who may not have appeared “black” could be targeted. On occasion, entire families were discovered to be black, and segregated. As featured in the film *Free State of Jones*, Davis Knight, the grandson of Newton Knight, the white leader of an interracial rebellion against the Confederacy in Mississippi during the Civil War, was charged in the late 1940s for marrying a white woman. Davis Knight was one-eighth black.

But now that the issue is the distribution of financial compensation rather than the meting out of “justice,” racial hurdles that are “time consuming and costly” are to be set up to limit recipients.

Civil rights lawyer Lisa Holder, a member of the task force who opposed these criteria, stated, “We must make sure we include present day and future harms... The system that folks are advocating for here, where we splice things up, where only one small slice benefits, will not abate the harms of racism.”

But the same must be said about the whole project of reparations. It diminishes neither the repugnance nor the historical significance of slavery to insist that the demand for reparations raises questions not only of history, but of contemporary social life. In the US, more than one million people were left to die of COVID-19 over the last two years. Inflation is running rampant, and fascism has returned as a political force. Police continue to kill workers of every race and ethnicity with impunity. A new “forever war” against nuclear-armed Russia is the order of the day. Inequality is greater than at any point in history, and what the ruling class fears most of all is the resurgence of the class struggle.

It is in this context of deep crisis that the call for reparations finds its moment. California is a stronghold of the Democratic Party in the US, with a Democratic governor, and a supermajority in the legislature. The Democratic Party, one of the two right-wing parties of capitalist rule in the US, has turned ever more obsessively to racialism and identity politics as a political tool to divide the working class along racial lines.

The *New York Times*’ flagship, the 1619 Project, has formed the intellectual spearhead of these politics. The basic conception underlying the racist falsifications of the 1619 Project is that the interests of “whites” and “blacks” are irreconcilably hostile, and that the conflict between these two camps forms the broad arc of American history. Historically, it denounces all that is progressive in American history, including the American Revolution and Civil War.

The WSWS has always insisted that the demand for reparations represents the interests of privileged layers of the upper-middle class and is aimed at dividing the working class. In mid-2019, towards the outset of the 2020 election season—a period in the election cycle in which the Democrats were taking pains to paint themselves in “left” colors—there were growing calls for reparations at the federal level. We wrote at the time:

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”?

And concluded:

The demand for monetary reparations has the unpleasant odor of a financial scam. Figures like [Ta-Nehisi] Coates and [Senator Cory] 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.*

We will see, as the task force continues their deliberations, further evidence of this. They will have to debate the question of funding at some point, but at this point, the working class has more than enough experience to understand that the ruling class will not give away anything for free. If there are to be reparations, then they will inevitably be implemented to the benefit of a thin layer of the minority elite and upper-middle class, and at the expense of the working class as a whole.



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