Burnham, King Charles and the dead end of apologies and reparations for slavery

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Prime Minister Andy Burnham's October 30 declaration that he was "open" to a formal state apology for Britain's role in the transatlantic slave trade was timed to coincide with the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), held in Antigua and Barbuda on November 3–4. It was an attempt to take the heat off King Charles III over the issue during his nine-day tour of the Bahamas, Guyana and Antigua.

The proposal is a particularly egregious example of the naked hypocrisy of all such apologies for historic crimes, coming from the mouth of a political representative of British imperialism and an active participant in the many crimes it continues to commit against billions of people.

In an opinion column in the *Guardian*, "British people can't be made to pay for the wrongs of slavery – but we must confront our complicated history," Burnham expressed his "sorrow and regret for the pain and suffering of so many millions." He offered a "structured dialogue" with affected states, and said calls for an apology would form part of it.

But he insisted: "Some have called for financial reparations for the slave trade. I do not believe that is the right answer. I do not think that British people today can be held liable for historical wrongs, however heinous, that happened in a different age under different laws and in which they played no personal part."

Instead of reparations, Burnham proposed a "new drive on debt." He wrote: "Today, debt-servicing costs in the poorest and most vulnerable countries are at their highest in more than 25 years. More than 40 percent of these countries spend more on interest repayments than on health. I want to launch a new drive on debt, working with our global partners to help those countries repay over a longer time period and with better rates." He would raise this at the summit alongside Chancellor John Healey, Foreign Secretary Ed Miliband and former prime minister Gordon Brown.

Burnham is offering scraps: a rescheduling of debt, not its cancellation. Countries would pay the full amount, only more slowly and a little more cheaply. The banks and bondholders in the City of London, whose fortunes were built in no small part on the slave trade and the plantation economy, will continue to be paid in full and, over time, could be paid more. Moreover, Burnham's statement that non-G7 lenders and the private sector must be involved is an admission that Britain cannot impose terms on most of the creditors, even if it wanted to.

His offer of SA paltry £40 million over three years for Caribbean infrastructure and green energy, taken from the existing aid budget, adds insult to injury.

Burnham's "apology" is a cynical device for safeguarding the interests of British imperialism. In an "increasingly divided and dangerous world," he wrote in the *Guardian*, the Commonwealth is "vital to our interests," offering openings for trade and economic collaboration. As British imperialism scrambles to hold its global position against its rivals, Burnham calculates that a few well-chosen words of contrition are a cheap safeguard against losing influence in Britain's former colonies.

His insistence that "British people" today cannot be held liable for wrongs committed in the past is a fraud. The only "people" he speaks for are the British bourgeoisie. His expressions of "sorrow and regret" for the suffering of millions were published the day after he told reporters his government was "working flat out" to cut the welfare bill—cutting benefits for the poorest workers in Britain to pay for rearmament.

The hypocrisy and class arrogance underlying his statements are underscored by the very different view the British state took of its obligations to the slave owners. The £20 million borrowed in 1835 to compensate them was 40 percent of the government's total annual expenditure, at least £2.4 billion in today's money. This colossal sum was paid to just 46,000 slave owners. It was rolled into government bonds that the Treasury continued to honour for 180 years, until 2015. Generations of British workers therefore paid taxes to service a debt incurred to compensate slave owners for the loss of their "property." Former slaves got nothing.

Opening the Commonwealth summit on November 3, the king echoed the position of the Burnham government. Finessing the demand for an apology into a display of personal breast-beating, he described the transatlantic slave trade as a "shameful chapter of history" that "fills my heart with horror and my soul with the most profound personal sorrow." But, he added, "We cannot change the actions of those who came before us."

Charles then had the gall to present Britain as the vanquisher of slavery, praising "the determination to end international trade in enslaved people," a cause in which, he said, "the Royal Navy played such a leading role." English and then British ships carried enslaved Africans across the Atlantic for almost two and a half centuries, from John Hawkins's first slaving voyage in 1562 until the Slave Trade Act of 1807, and slavery itself remained legal in Britain's colonies until 1834.

The human, social and economic costs of the slave trade and imperialism in Africa

The transatlantic slave trade was one of the greatest crimes in human history. Over 366 years, slaving vessels embarked some 12.5 million captives on the African coast and landed 10.7 million in the Americas. More than 1.8 million died on the Middle Passage, a voyage lasting around two months. British ships carried more than 3.2 million people, second only to Portugal.

The monarchy massively profited from slavery. Charles II (1630-1685) granted royal charters to the Company of Royal Adventurers Trading into Africa and its successor, the Royal African Company, both overseen by his brother James, Duke of York, the future James II. Between 1662 and 1731, the two companies carried more than 214,000 Africans across the Atlantic, shipping more Africans to the Americas than any other single

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institution in the history of the trade. More than 45,000 died on the voyage.

The profits of the trade and the plantations flowed into the ports of Liverpool, Bristol and London, and into the banks, insurance houses and country estates of Britain's ruling class, helping finance the industrial revolution and laying the basis for the ongoing accumulation of vast fortunes.

Marx identified the role of slavery in the birth of the capitalist system: "the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins, signalised the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production." Capital, he wrote, comes into the world "dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt."

In contrast, the trade began a process of underdevelopment from which Africa has never recovered. As the Guyanese historian Walter Rodney showed, Africa was integrated into the emerging world market not as a producer, but as a supplier of human labour for production elsewhere. Its own economic development was arrested at the very moment Western Europe's was accelerating.

Modern economic research has confirmed the scale of the damage. The economist Nathan Nunn found that the African countries from which the most slaves were taken are the poorest today, estimating that had the slave trades not taken place, some 72 percent of the average income gap between Africa and the rest of the world would not exist.

Abolition did not end the plunder of Africa. It changed its form, and the Royal Navy, whose "leading role" Charles praised, was central to the change. Its anti-slavery patrols, the West Africa Squadron established in 1808, became the advance guard of British influence on the West African coast, providing the pretext for intervention that culminated in the bombardment of Lagos in 1851 and its annexation 10 years later.

At the Berlin Conference of 1884–85, the European powers carved up the continent between them, and by 1914 only Ethiopia and Liberia remained formally independent. Lenin, writing in 1916, identified this as a defining feature of the new epoch of imperialism, in which "the territorial division of the whole world among the biggest capitalist powers is completed." What followed was colonial rule of the utmost brutality. Millions were slaughtered by Belgium, Germany, Britain, France and the other imperial powers, and whole economies were reshaped to export a single crop or mineral to the imperial centre.

In the Caribbean, emancipation was also followed by new forms of exploitation such as indentured labour that persisted until the end of the First World War. Haiti, which won its independence in history's only successful slave revolution—was forced in 1825, under the guns of French warships—to pay an indemnity of 150 million gold francs to its former masters and had to borrow from French banks to pay it. By 1914, more than three-quarters of its national budget was still going to service the debt, which was not finally settled until 1947. Haiti remains the poorest country in the Americas.

The independence won by the African and Caribbean colonies from the late 1950s did not end imperialist domination. Power passed to national bourgeois elites that left the economic structures of colonialism intact. Those who sought to challenge them paid with their lives. Patrice Lumumba, who demanded that the Congo control its own mineral wealth, was murdered in 1961 with the complicity of Belgium and the United States.

The workers and poor farmers of Africa and the Caribbean do not simply confront the legacy of slavery and colonialism, but a living system of exploitation that is administered from the City of London, Wall Street and the Paris Bourse. From the 1980s, the International Monetary Fund and World Bank imposed "structural adjustment" programmes across the former colonies. They privatised industries, cut subsidies and gutted health and education. The result is a continent shackled by debt.

African governments now spend an average of 17 percent of state revenue on servicing it. Thirty-two African countries spend more on external debt service than on healthcare, and 25 spend more than on education. African states pay on average four times what the United States pays to borrow.

At the same time, wealth continues to be drained out of the continent. At least $254 billion is taken out of Africa every year: $104 billion in external debt service, $88.6 billion in illicit financial flows, $32.4 billion in profits repatriated by multinational companies and $29 billion through illegal logging, fishing and the wildlife trade. The illicit flows alone exceed what Africa receives in aid. The smaller Caribbean states are likewise at the mercy of the same global financial system, dependent on tourism, remittances and offshore finance and periodically subjected to International Monetary Fund (IMF) austerity.

The scale of the crime of the slave trade and its lasting impact on the world not only renders an apology by the descendants of its architects a cruel joke. It demonstrates the futility of the campaign waged by the African and West Indian bourgeoisie and petty-bourgeoisie to remedy it through reparations.

The dead end of reparations

What would reparations for slavery amount to? The US economic consultancy the Brattle Group estimates that transatlantic chattel slavery inflicted losses on its victims of $77–108 trillion, valuing the lives of 19 million enslaved people across 31 countries—roughly 802 million years of life lived in bondage. Continuing harm after abolition adds another $23 trillion, pushing the total to $100–131 trillion.

Britain's share is about $24 trillion for enslavement, owed to 14 countries, plus about $2 trillion for harm after abolition. Britain's share alone is more than six times the annual output of the British economy. No capitalist government will ever pay such a sum. This does not price the damage done to African societies by the depopulation, warfare and arrested development that Nathan Nunn's research measures.

The reparations movement knows this. It is dominated by heads of government who administer the brutal exploitation of their own citizens on behalf of global corporations and banks, supported by privileged layers of the black petty-bourgeoisie in their own countries and in the imperialist centres. Its leaders utilise the issue for their own self-advancement and, in the case of the African and West Indian political elite, to posture as friends of the workers and rural poor whose lives they make a misery.

Barbados Prime Minister Mia Mottley has called for Britain to pay $4.9 trillion. On taking office in 2018, she entered a four-year IMF-backed programme to restructure the country's unsustainable debts. It led to more than 1,000 public sector redundancies, economic contraction and rising unemployment. She has kept the country on IMF-backed programmes ever since.

The official "champion" for reparations in Africa is Ghana's President John Dramani Mahama, who sponsored the UN General Assembly resolution of March 25, 2026, declaring the trafficking of enslaved Africans the gravest crime against humanity. In June, he hosted the Accra conference that adopted a joint African Union–CARICOM (Caribbean Community) 19-point plan calling for formal apologies, financial compensation, debt relief and the return of looted cultural property. French President Emmanuel Macron, head of the former colonial power still entrenched across West Africa, was invited to address it and cautioned against a "simple cheque" or accounting logic to reparations. Mahama has administered the $3 billion IMF austerity programme Ghana agreed in 2023.

In Britain, the parliamentary campaign for reparations is led by Bell

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Ribeiro-Addy, Labour MP for Clapham and Brixton Hill, who chairs the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Afrikan Reparations. She insisted that reparation "starts with an apology, which costs nothing."

The reparations movement wins popular support from a sincere hatred of the crimes of slavery and colonialism. But its leadership seeks only a renegotiation of the terms on which the former colonies are exploited within world imperialism, through apologies, debt rescheduling and development funds, while maintaining their own seat at the table.

Irrespective of the motives of its participants, the demand for reparations raised by CARICOM, the African Union and their supporters in Britain is incapable of redressing the historic wrongs of slavery and colonialism because it does not address the still existing system responsible for them.

A reparations settlement, before repairing a single school or hospital, would have to match capital drain from Africa of $254 billion every year, indefinitely. Over a single generation of 25 years, that comes to more than $6.3 trillion, before any account is taken of the damage the slave trade and colonialism inflicted. A one-off payment of $1 trillion, far beyond anything any imperialist government has ever contemplated, would be recovered by the banks, corporations and bondholders in four years.

Reparations could only have a real impact if they put an end to the outflows themselves: the cancellation of all debts, an end to the repatriation of profits and the seizure of the wealth hidden in offshore accounts. This would require the expropriation of the transnational corporations and banks, which no capitalist government will ever carry out.

Then there is the question of who would pay and who would receive it. Payment would come from the taxes of working people and further cuts to public services. The fortunes built on slavery, consolidated over two centuries into the banks, insurance houses, landed estates and corporations of the City, would be untouched. This is exactly the ground on which Conservative leader Kemi Badenoch, Reform UK and the far right seek to mobilise opposition to any reckoning with the legacy of empire.

Moreover, reparations are conceived as transfers between states. The money would be administered by the same national ruling elites that preside over poverty, IMF austerity and the super-exploitation of workers.

Most important from a political standpoint, the demand for reparations defines the injured and the guilty by descent, not by class. In Britain and the US, it has been taken up by sections of the upper middle class around Labour, the Democrats and in the universities for precisely this reason. Their premise is that the fundamental division in society is race, and that guilt for slavery is inherited by all white people. That includes workers whose own ancestors were driven off the land into the factories and mines, or who worked in Lancashire's cotton mills spinning slave-grown cotton for starvation wages. Such politics divide the working class, to the benefit of the ruling class that profited from slavery and profits from exploitation today.

Workers in Britain, Africa and the Caribbean face a common struggle against a common enemy: the same banks, corporations and bondholders, and the governments that serve them. Burnham's cuts to welfare to fund rearmament, the IMF programmes administered by African and Caribbean governments, and the debt payments that take precedence over hospitals and schools are different forms of one global system of exploitation.

The working class can confront it only by uniting across every border and every division of ethnicity. This is being confirmed by the wave of Gen Z youth-led protests that began in Africa, where young Kenyans stormed parliament in 2024 against an IMF-backed finance bill, and which is now engulfing Europe, from school blockades in France to housing camps in Madrid. The grievances are the same everywhere: decent schools, housing and jobs, the cost of living, and the diversion of social resources to debt repayments and war.

Slavery was not a crime of one "race" against another. It was a system of labour exploitation, rationalised by racism, at the heart of the primitive accumulation of capital. Its beneficiaries were a class of merchants, planters, bankers and manufacturers. They turned the same methods against the working class at home and throughout the empire, and their heirs still rule today.

There is a different tradition to that which Burnham represents, and which he cynically invoked in his *Guardian* op-ed piece, when he boasts of Britain's role in ending slavery. During the American Civil War, the cotton workers of Lancashire, thrown into destitution by the Union blockade of the slave South, rallied in support of the war against slavery. Abraham Lincoln wrote to the working men of Manchester in 1863 to honour their stand. Marx and the International Workingmen's Association fought to make the emancipation of the enslaved a cause of the international working class. That is the tradition on which the struggle against the legacy of slavery must also be based.

The crimes of slavery and colonialism will not be redressed by apologies drafted in Downing Street and Buckingham Palace, or by negotiations between capitalist governments over a settlement. What is required is the unconditional cancellation of the debts of the former colonies, the expropriation of the banks and corporations whose wealth was built on slavery and colonial plunder, and the placing of society's resources under the democratic control of the working class.

This can only be achieved through the unified struggle of workers in Britain, Africa, the Caribbean and internationally, on the basis of a world socialist programme. That is the perspective fought for by the International Committee of the Fourth International and the Socialist Equality Party.

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