

## Reparations and the Black Struggle: A Discussion led by Monica Moorehead

If we're going to have reparations, the knife of racial oppression must be fully removed. There must be a full accounting of white-supremacist crimes — an accounting that is not cut abruptly short at the year 1865. Give us reparations for Eric Garner. Give us reparations for the Central Park 5. Give us reparations for Stop-and-Frisk survivors and Freddie Gray and Sandra Bland. Give us reparations for no-knock warrants, solitary confinement and Amadou Diallo.

Justice is another key element of this discussion that is often ignored. True reparations are not just a payment for wages stolen in 1860 or a settlement for a family who lost a loved one to police terror in 2010. It is not enough. Reparation means justice. It means treating the perpetrators of white-supremacist violence as the criminals they are. To do anything less is to deny the humanity of their victims.

Why is it that when a police officer kills an unarmed Black person, it is almost impossible to secure a criminal conviction, but almost inevitable that a civil settlement will be won? Why are U.S. municipalities so willing to pay millions to victims' families but so unwilling to punish the police? Part of this comes from the legacy of treating Black people as property — and by extension — treating violence against Black people as mere property destruction.

The necessary process of shifting away from this mentality — of Black people reclaiming our humanity — is the demand that crimes against Black people be met with real punishment. Without this shift, Black people may be free in name, but they will remain slaves in fact.

Finally, if we truly want reparations — to undo the destruction of white supremacy and repair the damage — we first have to identify the source of that destruction and dismantle it. Slavery came about because the wealthy sought to increase their fortunes by plundering the resources of others. The fastest way to do this was to steal the labor of a group of people who were seen as different and disposable. It is this system, where the rich loot from the poor, where the bosses feed off the workers, which drives white-supremacist violence. Everything else — prisons, detention centers, cops, judges and more — all flow from that original sin. True reparations would mean an end to capitalism itself.

2. Before we discuss further the issue of reparations, let's re-read Lenin's fifth component of imperialism;

(5) the territorial division of the whole world among the biggest capitalist powers is completed. Imperialism is capitalism at that stage of development at which the dominance of monopolies and finance capital is established; in which the export of capital has acquired pronounced importance; in which the division of the world among the international trusts has begun, in which the division of all territories of the globe among the biggest capitalist powers has been completed.

Therefore, wherever imperialism has reared its ugly head, the national question becomes a global issue. Developments around Kashmir in 2019 illustrate the ongoing nature of this issue.

### 3. Reparations and the National Question:

\* Why was Reconstruction viewed as revolutionary? [It was a radical attempt to bring about full social rights for a sector of our class which was in bondage. Marx, who supported the north in the Civil War, stated "Labor in the white skin can never be emancipated while labor in the Black skin is branded." Enslaved people were workers. In "Black Reconstruction," W.E.B. DuBois stated that the enslaved people had the right to strike as workers.]

\* Why was the destruction of Reconstruction counter-revolutionary?

- \* What is the relationship between Reconstruction, which happened in the U. S. over 150 years ago, and the state of Black people today?
- \* What are some of the conditions that Black people face especially in disproportionate numbers?

**4. Reparations and the class struggle:** The conditions that we have shared reflect the historical and political reality that Black people as a nation, no matter the geography, have been denied full social equality, or full bourgeois democratic rights, that whites in general have had for hundreds of years.

This denial has historically set back the class struggle for socialism and communism. Every struggle--whether the demand has been for some kind of reform like the right to vote or to have a lamp post in a neighborhood, or a revolutionary demand like the right to self-defense against the police or for land in the South--is part and parcel of the struggle for social equality,

And that's where the issue of reparations comes in. Reparations are demands that represent an unpaid debt that the institutionalized white supremacist system owes to the Black diaspora in one form or another. And this debt has been and continues to be expressed in different political forms in different eras and conditions, but all rooted in the struggle for Black Liberation and class equality.

If there is a clear understanding of the relationship between imperialism and national liberation, the demands of the most oppressed will also be understood and should be supported and defended.

It is not up to socialists and communists to speak on behalf of the nationally oppressed peoples, as has been done too many times in the past. But those erroneous situations should be studied so they are never repeated. It's all about building class solidarity with the most oppressed.

Let's look at how reparations have been expressed by diverse political and ideological views:

Quotes on reparations from Malcolm X and from Dr. King, drawn from Monica Moorehead's "Reparations and Black Liberation," in Marxism, Reparations and the Black Freedom Struggle.

Malcolm X also raised the question of reparations in a speech on Nov. 23, 1964, in Paris. "If you are the son of a man who had a wealthy estate and you inherit your father's estate," he said, "you have to pay off the debts that your father incurred before he died. The only reason that the present generation of white Americans are in a position of economic strength ... is because their fathers worked our fathers for over 400 years with no pay."

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., leader of the traditional Civil Rights movement, made a plea for reparations in his 1964 book, "Why We Can't Wait." He wrote, "No amount of gold could provide an adequate compensation for the exploitation and humiliation of the Negro in America (or the Caribbean, or Brazil) down through the centuries. Not all the wealth of this affluent (American) society could meet the bill. Yet a price can be placed upon unpaid wages. The ancient common law has always provided a remedy for the appropriation of one human being by another. The law should be made to apply for American (Caribbean and Brazilian) Negroes. The payment should be in the form of a massive program by the government of special, compensatory measures, which could be regarded as a settlement in accordance with the accepted practice of common law. Such measures would certainly be less expensive than any computation based on two centuries of unpaid wages and accumulated interest. I am proposing, therefore, that just as we granted a G.I. Bill of Rights to war veterans, America launch a broad-based and gigantic Bill of Rights for the Disadvantaged, our veterans of the long siege of denial."

Important Question: Do white workers owe Black people reparations?

**5. Conclusion:** We have only touched the surface of the issue of reparations and the national question, intrinsically linked to each other because supporting and defending reparations in the form of demands made by national oppressed people concretely applies the theory of national oppression and class society.

There can be no class solidarity if anti-racist solidarity, along with solidarity with the gender oppressed, is not forged in struggle against the entire capitalist system.

Two documents were written by Sam Marcy, Workers World Party's late chairperson, afford more material to focus on the centrality of the national question in the class struggle inside the U.S., in theory and practice. Sam wrote "Busing and self-determination" in 1975 and "The right of self-determination and the class struggle" in 1983, and both are still as relevant today as decades ago.

Marcy shows in these articles how Marxism is a social science that can be applied objectively to every domestic and international development, no matter the epoch.

To close, let's have someone read the first four paragraphs of Marcy's article, "The right to self-determination and the class struggle."

Of all the great domestic political problems facing the working class and the oppressed people, none surpasses in importance the relationship of national oppression to the class struggle.

Indeed, one may say that it is at the heart of the basic social problem in the United States. It touches every form of social existence, and no sector of society is free from it.

For Marxists in particular it is the acid test of the correctness of their general political program. It is also a test of the revolutionary integrity of the party, in particular as this is manifested in day to day practical application. Probably nowhere else is theory so severely tested by practice as in the field of the national question.

Upon the solution of the national question may very well depend the destiny of the working class in the struggle against capitalism as well as the future of socialism.

*Choose from these additional readings in groups or as individuals. After reading, take 10 minutes to prepare a quick report for the class.*

1. Makasi Motema, "How real reparations can be won" <https://www.workers.org/2019/07/42891/> (concluding paragraphs). See also in folder: Motema – Overview Reparations.
2. Siddika Degla, "Roots of the Kashmir conflict," *Workers World/Mundo Obrero*, Aug. 29, 2019 [workers.org/2019/08/43483/](https://www.workers.org/2019/08/43483/) .
3. Sam Marcy, "Bussing and Self-Determination: The NAACP Rally" (1975) [Very long but very important. Assign as homework after "The National Question and the Black Struggle" class.] [www.marxists.org/history/etol/writers/marcy/busing.html](http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/writers/marcy/busing.html)
4. Monica Moorehead, "Reparations and Black Liberation" [www.workers.org/2020/02/46154/](https://www.workers.org/2020/02/46154/)
5. Monica Morehead, "Why we support the Jesse Jackson campaign," *Workers World*, Dec. 8, 1983
6. Randall Robinson, *The Debt: What America Owes to Blacks* (2000)