

# Emancipation Rebellion Heirs, Don't Grin and Bear Jamaica's Oppression!

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*"Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will. Find out just what any people will quietly submit to and you have found out the exact measure of injustice and wrong which will be imposed upon them, and these will continue till they are resisted with either words or blows, or with both. The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress." — Frederick Douglass, abolitionist, feminist and political figure*

On 27 December 1831, the enslaved Africans in western Jamaica confirmed that slavery is a very violent system of domination and the possibility of its abolition obligates its victim to use the violence of armed, collective self-defense to destroy economic oppression and racist dehumanization. This necessary response to ridding the world of slavery is similar to the revolutionary psychiatrist and theorist of Third World revolution Frantz Fanon's position on how to eliminate colonialism.

Fanon asserts in his book *The Wretched of the Earth* that:

In its bare reality, decolonization (the quest for an end to slavery) reeks of red-hot cannonball and bloody knives. For the last can only be the first after a murderous and decisive confrontation between the two protagonists (the enslaved and the enslavers). This determination to have the last move up to the front, to have them clamber up (too quickly, say some) to the organized echelons of an organized society, can only succeed by resorting to every means, including, of course, violence.<sup>[1]</sup>

These enslaved African workers, under the leadership of the enslaved Native Baptist preacher Sam Sharpe, made the decision to carry out a general strike, if they did not get a wage for their labour power after 25 December 1831. Edward Hylton, a close associate of Sharpe shares his recollection of their stance and behaviour at a strategy session that doubled-up as a prayer meeting, "If backra would pay them, they would work as before. If any attempt was made to force them to work as slaves, they would fight for their freedom. They took the oath and kissed the Bible."<sup>[2]</sup>

The literate Sharp articulates the demand of his comrades and the broader enslaved thus: "We have worked enough already, and will work no more; the life we live is too bad, it is the life of a dog, we won't be slaves no more, we won't lift hoe no more, we won't take flogging anymore."<sup>[3]</sup> The use of the general strike or the total withdrawal of labour from the capitalist production process holds a central place in the outlook of anarchist syndicalists and communists<sup>[4]</sup> and state socialists or communists.

These enslaved African workers were committed to putting into practice this major weapon in the class struggle between the workers and the bourgeoisie or capitalists – deny them access to the labour power of the labouring classes. However, these enslaved Africans knew that denying their labour to the capitalist plantocracy through the general strike might call for the use of violence to defend their inalienable right to control their labour power.

These Africans figured out long before the Italian anarchist Errico Malatesta admonished the anarcho-syndicalists that the general strike was not a substitute for the armed insurrection. Malatesta believes that the “soldiers, policemen and even the bourgeoisie themselves” will come out in armed retaliation against the workers, “and then the question will have to be resolved by bullets and bombs. It will be the insurrection, and victory will go to the strongest.”[\[5\]](#)

The white enslavers and their militia and the armed might of British imperialism answered the just demand of the general strikers for immediate emancipation and payment for their labour power with brute force.[\[6\]](#) The aggressive response of the enslavers and British imperialism gave birth to the largest rebellion of the enslaved in Jamaica – the Emancipation Rebellion (aka the Christmas Rebellion) that involved 20,000[\[7\]](#) to [60,000](#)[\[8\]](#) rebels.

As a testament to the humanity of the enslaved Africans and in spite of the brutality and inhumanity of slavery about twelve whites were killed, largely combatants or those who violently resisted. The Insurgents were selective of the plantations that were targeted for destruction.[\[9\]](#) The rebels destroyed many estates and the estimated value of these damaged properties came in at £1,112,318 and the financial breakdown for the parishes is reflected below:

St. James: £ 606,250

Hanover: £425,818

Westmoreland: £47,092

St. Elizabeth: £22,146

Trelawny: £4,960

Manchester: £46,270

Portland: £772

St. Thomas in the East: £1,280.[\[10\]](#)

The colonial state claimed that only 204 enslaved Africans were killed during the rebellion. But doubt has been casted on that figure because the militia engaged in a lot of revenge killings. The planters as members of the militia showed no mercy toward apprehended suspects.[\[11\]](#) Six hundred and twenty-six Africans were brought before the judicial authority and the state executed three hundred and twelve defendants.[\[12\]](#) Many defendants were “judicially” murdered for relatively trivial offences.

Sam Sharpe was murdered by the state on 23 May 1832. This date should be publicly commemorated throughout the former British colonies. Sharpe defiantly went to the gallows and proclaimed that he “would rather die upon yonder gallows than live in slavery.”[\[13\]](#)

The rebellion was brutally suppressed and the Methodist missionary Henry Bleby passed judgment on the severity of white victor's justice in his book [Death Struggles of Slavery: Being a Narrative of Facts and Incidents, Which Occurred in a British Colony, During the Two Years Immediately Preceding Negro Emancipation](#):

Had the masters when they got the upper hand been as forbearing, as tender of their slaves' lives as their slaves had been of theirs it would have been to their lasting honour, and to the permanent advantage of the colony.[14]

British colonialism took the month of January to completely put down the rebellion, although it was effectively over after eight to ten days. The scope of the uprising and the level of damage to property impressed upon the minds of many planters and as well as the British authority that slavery's days were numbered in Jamaica.

British pragmatism won the day because it realized that emancipation-from-above was better for maintaining colonialism than the example of the Haitian Revolution's emancipation-from-below. Reckford accurately captures the practical thinking of British imperialism when she states that "The slaves had demonstrated to some at least of those in authority that it could prove more dangerous and expensive to maintain the old system than to abolish it." [15]

On 24 May 1832, the British Parliament appointed the members of the [Select Committee on the Extinction of Slavery Throughout The British Dominions](#) to recommend the best way to end slavery. An act to abolish slavery was passed in August 1833 to take effective on 1 August 1834, albeit with a six-year apprenticeship period before full freedom.

Notwithstanding the appearance of the British granting freedom to enslaved African workers, those rebels in Jamaica were [the authors of the emancipation process](#). [16] The rebels nurtured and watered the tree of liberty with their blood, sweat and desire for self-determination. The heirs of the Emancipation Rebellion, the contemporary Afrikan working-class in Jamaica, should draw lessons and inspiration from the collective struggle that was used to put an end to chattel slavery.

The labouring classes should not put up with the exploitation of capitalism, heteronormativity, patriarchy and racism. The nature and scope of the oppression faced by the working-class in Jamaica and other Caribbean territories ought to be seen and framed as furthering the goal of the Second Emancipation – complete freedom and equity for all. A systematic programme of resistance informed by a revolutionary ideology will be needed in the fight for social and economic justice.

British imperialism compensated the planters for losing their capital or property in enslaved Africans with the abolition of slavery. Africans were not compensated for their centuries of unpaid labour. They left slavery empty-handed and entered the wage-slavery of capitalism with little to no economic and political bargaining power in their relations with their capitalist bosses and the colonial structure.

In fact, the colonial order used all available means to limit the economic autonomy of the newly freed Africans. According to University of the West Indies lecturer Clinton Hutton in his book [Colour for Colour, Skin for Skin: Marching with the Ancestral Spirits into War Oh at Morant Bay](#), the colonial administrators and planters used various means to deny the

emancipated African-Jamaicans access to unoccupied Crown lands, secured land tenure arrangements as well as unfettered use of economic associations to facilitate economic development.[\[17\]](#)

The economic marginalization and exploitation of the current labouring classes in Jamaica is tied to their class experience of the past as well as the present. One should not embrace the presence of African men and women at the centre of the political system as a substantive step on the path of economic security for the African working people. The political rulers are class enemies of the economically oppressed. These privileged political actors are pursuing policies and programmes that advance their interests and that of international capital or corporations.

Nothing less than the working-class's ownership, control and management of their workplaces or the productive assets will be acceptable as the basis for economic justice and social peace in Jamaica. The working-class should not be distracted by the race of the dominant, non-African capitalists who own and control the economy. The members of this exploited class ought to adopt the following dictum of Nyahbingi "Death to all black and white oppressors." They should not let African-Jamaican capitalists use racial nationalism to co-opt their support against non-African capitalists. All capitalists exploit the working-class.

The murderous behavior of the Jamaican Constabulary Force against the working-class as documented in the recently-released Amnesty International report "[Waiting in vain – Jamaica: Unlawful police killings and relatives' long struggle for justice](#)" should be seen as evidence that the coercive arm of the state is operating against the people in a similar manner as in the days of slavery. The police might largely come from the working-class but they are serving the interests of the neocolonial order and are the armed guardian of the rich and powerful. The working-class must embrace the idea and practice of establishing collective self-defense networks to protect themselves from the violence of the state and the criminalized lumpen elements.

During slavery and colonialism, the political institutions were controlled by the privileged members of society and it is the same thing today. The parliament is mostly populated by men and the petite bourgeoisie or middle-class. It is very encouraging to see the low level of working-class turnout for the February 2016 national elections. Only [47.7 per cent of Jamaicans](#) went to the general election polls.[\[18\]](#) A mere [30 per cent of voters bothered to vote](#) in the November 2016 local government elections, which is the poorest turnout for municipal elections in Jamaica's electoral history since universal adult suffrage.[\[19\]](#)

Newspapers, commentators and the political establishment are moaning over low voter participation in selecting the political masters. However, progressive and revolutionary forces should take the people's vote of non-confidence in the electoral system as an opportunity to organise with them for a credible anti-racist, feminist, queer positive and socialist power-from-below programme that is centred upon the working-class.

The progressive organizers must organize around the material needs of the people and encourage the formation or strengthening of the autonomous working-class organizations of the people. We must strive for the self-organization or self-emancipation of the people in the tradition of Walter Rodney and anarchism.

Working-class Jamaicans are heirs to a legacy of resistance and uprisings from which they may reasonably take inspiration and draw lessons to constructively fight oppressive

conditions as in the past. The challenge is to be in permanent and organized resistance to oppression, while building alternative people-controlled institutions and contesting the dominant institutions to reflect the class, racial, sexuality and gender interests of the working-class. The rebels of the Emancipation Rebellion have cleared a portion of the path to liberation. The present generation of sufferers and their allies must continue to extend it until victory over capitalism, racism, patriarchy and homophobia is achieved.

What is taken as social activism in Jamaica today is largely foreign-financed NGO social service delivery and policy advocacy that cannot facilitate revolutionary organizing and resistance. The imperialist states in North America and Europe as well as the various United Nations' initiatives will not self-consciously fund local social and economic programmes that are opposed to imperialism and capitalism. Of course, some of these programmes might better the lives of some members of the target groups in ways that allow them to survive in the oppressive order.

However, the Second Emancipation phase of the struggle is all about liberating the potentialities of the labouring classes to shape society in their own image and interest. The Second Emancipation is not reformist in its orientation. It is transformative and revolutionary in its thrust and impact. It is for this reason that gender, class, race, sexuality, (dis)ability and other bases of oppression must be a central part of the organizing strategy for freedom, respect, dignity, self-determination and justice in Jamaica.

## Notes

[1] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 3.

[2] Noel Leo Erskine, "The Roots of Rebellion and Rasta Theology in Jamaica," *Black Theology: An International Journal*, 5, no. 1 (2007), 114.

[3] *Ibid.*, 115.

[4] Robert Graham, [Siegfried Nacht: The Social General Strike \(1905\)](https://robertgraham.wordpress.com/siegfried-nacht-the-social-general-strike-1905/), Robert Graham's Anarchism Weblog, Accessed on December 26, 2016, <https://robertgraham.wordpress.com/siegfried-nacht-the-social-general-strike-1905/>

[5] Errico Malatesta cited in Peter Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism*, (London: Fontana Press, 1993), 352.

[6] Kevin O'Brien Chang, "Sam Sharpe-Emancipation Hero," *The Gleaner*, July 27, 2012. Accessed on December 26, 2016, <http://jamaica-gleaner.com/gleaner/20120727/lead/lead9.html>

[7] Erskine, "Roots of Rebellion," 113.

[8] The Abolition Project, "Case Study 4: Jamaica (1831) – Samuel Sharpe," *The Abolition Project*, Accessed on December 26, 2016, [http://abolition.e2bn.org/resistance\\_55.html](http://abolition.e2bn.org/resistance_55.html)

[9] Sultana Afroz, "The Jihad of 1831-1832: The Misunderstood Baptist Rebellion in Jamaica," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 21, No. 2 (2001), 240.

[10] See note 38, Mary Reckford, "The Jamaica Slave Rebellion of 1831," *Past & Present*, no. 40 (1968), 120. Accessed on December 26, 2016, <http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/slavery/PP-1968.pdf>

[11] Paul Brown, "Representations of Rebellion: Slavery in Jamaica, 1823-1831" (Master of Arts Thesis, Clemson University, 2014), 92-93, Permalink: [http://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all\\_theses/1984/](http://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all_theses/1984/)

[12] Reckford, "Jamaica Slave Rebellion," 121-122.

[13] Sharpe's own words as cited in Afroza, "The Jihad of 1831-1832," 241.

[14] Reckford, "Jamaica Slave Rebellion," cited on page 124.

[15] Ibid., 125.

[16] Martin Henry, "Christmas Rebellion pushed Emancipation," The Gleaner, December 27, 2017. Accessed on December 26, 2016, <http://jamaica-gleaner.com/article/focus/20151227/christmas-rebellion-pushed-emancipation>.

[17] Clinton A. Hutton, Colour for Colour, Skin for Skin: Marching with the Ancestral Spirits into War Oh at Morant Bay, (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle Publishers, 2015), 5-12.

[18] Anika Richards, "Low voter turnout should concern Jamaicans - Bruce Golding," Jamaica Observer, February 29, 2016. Accessed on December 26, 2016, <http://www.jamaicaobserver.com/news/Low-voter-turnout-should-concern-Jamaicans-Bruce-Golding>.

[19] Jamaica Observer, "Mere crocodile tears over low voter turnout," Jamaica Observer, November 30, 2016. Accessed on December 26, 2016, [http://www.jamaicaobserver.com/news/politics/Mere-crocodile-tears-over-low-voter-turnout\\_82006](http://www.jamaicaobserver.com/news/politics/Mere-crocodile-tears-over-low-voter-turnout_82006).

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