

# Localizing Reparations During an Era of Intensified Repression

African Americans were victimized by enslavement, legalized segregation and capitalist exploitation which was supported by the federal government

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*A New York Times Sunday edition article on September 26 devoted an entire page, excluding an ad for luxurious furniture, to an examination of various efforts in the United States to initiate measures aimed at addressing historic discrimination and institutional racism.*

Reparations, the demand for material and monetary compensation for the exploitation and national oppression of African Americans from the periods of colonial and antebellum enslavement right through the enactment of legalized segregation (Jim Crow) to the contemporary unequal social status and police misconduct, has gained considerable attention over the last five decades.

The New York Times begins its report with a focus on Detroit where during the post-World War II years, thousands of African American families were forcibly removed from the lower east side in the areas known as Black Bottom, Paradise Valley and others. In the mid-1950s, utilizing eminent domain, the white administration ordered people to leave certain areas of the city with almost no provisions for relocation or restitution.

Later, by the early 1960s, people living, working, worshipping, and conducting business along Hasting Street and neighboring areas were told to leave so that the Chrysler and Fisher Freeways could be constructed. These highways were designed in part to transport whites from their places of employment in the city out to the suburbs where homes and business complexes were being built. The Times article says that over 43,000 people were dislocated from the eastside within a decade.



Detroit Rebellion erupts on 12th and Clairmount, July 23, 1967 (Source: Abayomi Azikiwe)

In 1956, the Federal Aid Highway Act, also known as the National Interstate and Defense Highways Act, was passed and signed into law by the then administration of **President Dwight D. Eisenhower**. It should be noted that the defense component of the legislation was enacted under Eisenhower who was Commander of the European Theater during World War II for the U.S.

A group of lawyers and political activists within the Detroit Democratic Party apparatus have placed a proposal on the upcoming November 2 ballot which would establish a taskforce to examine what reparations would look like in the city. The language on the proposal is quite vague and there has been no real discussion on how issues such as the displacement of Black communities, by not only the existing municipal administrations at the time, but more importantly, acknowledging that these policies stemmed from the profit motives of real estate firms, banks, the automotive industry and the federal government.

Since the 1950s, the population of the city of Detroit has declined every single census period to the present. From its peak at 1.8 million people in 1950, some 70 years later the number of people estimated to be living in Detroit is 637, 601. With the encouraged abandonment and forced removals of approximately 1.2 million residents over seven decades, any task force looking at reparations would demand a program for repopulation of the city with a principal focus on African Americans and other nationally oppressed groups dislocated by the combination of private and governmental forces.

Yet the current economic trajectory of the corporate interests and their imposed-**Mayor Mike Duggan** does not include the reconstruction of Black communities in Detroit as part of their agenda. Even though the existing administration may not directly oppose the proposal on the November ballot, the question remains as to what type of approach will the taskforce take in recommendations to ameliorate the present situation stemming from a historical legacy of policies which negatively impacted African Americans.

After being forced from Black Bottom and Paradise Valley many within the African American population relocated to the westside area of Virginia Park. It was in this very neighborhood that the 1967 rebellion erupted on July 23rd of that year. This uprising was the largest of its kind initiated by African Americans up until that time. The Rebellion ushered in a period of

resistance within the auto industry, schools and colleges, neighborhoods and unrepresentative political structures.

The election of the Detroit's first African American **Mayor Coleman A. Young** was a direct result of the struggles emanating from housing discrimination, dislocation, super-exploitation within industry, corporate media distortions, the fight against police brutality and policy neglect from the successive municipal and federal administrations. Since the period of 1974-1993 when Young was in office, the consistent erosion of any semblance of political power in Detroit among African Americans is an apparent social reality.

### **Other Local Efforts for Reparations**

An announcement by the City of Evanston, Illinois, located north of Chicago, that it would enact a reparations program by providing housing assistance grants to African Americans. The city leaders say they are recognizing the discrimination in housing which has existed for decades in major urban areas and their suburbs.

These efforts have drawn criticism from both whites as well as people within the African American community. The conservative whites are claiming that any project to assist Blacks represents "preferential treatment" and "reverse discrimination. On the other hand, many African Americans contend that the realization of any genuine form of reparations extends far beyond the role of local governments and must hold the federal government and the multinational corporations accountable for their role in the oppression and exploitation of African Americans.

The [New York Times article](#) from September 26 reports that:

"'There are a number of detours away from what I would call true reparations, and one of those are these alleged local programs,' said William A. Darity, Jr., an economics professor at Duke University who has studied reparations for decades. Mr. Darity argues that an adequate reparations program, totaling about \$11.2 trillion for an estimated 45 million Americans — more than 13 percent of the U.S. population — who would qualify for it, can only exist on the federal level. Where cities plan to get these funds to support a local reparations program remains to be seen. Some of these local officials are looking for answers that don't automatically equate to a huge cash payout."

In Tulsa, Oklahoma where the centenary of the 1921 race massacre was recently commemorated, the demand for reparations is rising from the community. Over 300 African Americans were killed on May 31-June 1 when white racist mobs including police, elected officials and national guard troops destroyed churches, homes, small businesses and social organizations which dislocated thousands.

For years the City of Tulsa and the State of Oklahoma deliberately withheld information about the race massacre and instead described it as a "riot." Three survivors of the 1921 murderous spree in Tulsa are demanding reparations for their suffering and loss of generational wealth.

The [Oklahoman newspaper wrote](#) on this question in May emphasizing:

"Across the United States, renewed calls for reparations to help right decades-old racial injustices have been part of a racial reckoning that seemed to gain momentum in the wake of the killing of George Floyd.

As the centennial of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre is commemorated and survivors of the tragedy are honored, a demand for justice in the form of reparations will continue to be part of the conversation. Damario Solomon-Simmons, lead attorney for a landmark reparations lawsuit against the city of Tulsa and other entities, said the case for reparations has successfully been made in other situations across the country, and reparations for massacre survivors and their descendants are long overdue.”

## **Reparations and the Existing Power Structure in the 21st Century**

Many scholars have documented the causal relationship between the rise of the Atlantic slave trade, colonialism and the advent of industrial capitalism. Writers such as **W.E.B. Du Bois, Eric Williams, Walter Rodney**, among many others, have long ago made the case for the rejection of the false narratives enunciated by the beneficiaries of exploitation and national oppression.

The growth and prosperity of capitalism and imperialism in Western Europe and North America is not due to the superiority or ingenuity of the white ruling class. The profits accrued from African enslaved labor and colonial exploitation provided the economic basis for every major industry which emerged during the 19th and 20th centuries. Today, in the 21st century, a reckoning on the part of the oppressed is mounting.

With specific reference to Detroit, the African American community has played a leading role in the development of the reparations demand. The Nation of Islam (NOI), which was founded in Detroit in the early 1930s, later during the 1960s called for the allocation of substantial portions of land within or outside the U.S. where African Americans would form their own nation. The NOI believed that the descendants of slave masters owed a debt to the former enslaved mandating that this independent Black state be subsidized by the federal government for 20-25 years.

Later in Detroit during March 1968, over 500 delegates to the inaugural conference of the Republic of New Africa (RNA) demanded the granting of five southern states to Blacks in the U.S. to form their own territorial nation. The following year, in April 1969, the National Black Economic Development Conference was held at Wayne State University in Detroit. A Black Manifesto was drafted by former Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Executive Secretary and International Affairs Coordinator, Dr. James R. Forman, and adopted by the gathering of several hundred people.

Forman’s Black Manifesto began with a resounding call for Black Liberation and Socialism in the U.S. The document demands the payment of \$500 million to \$3 billion in reparations which would be utilized to build educational institutions, media and publishing outlets, cooperative housing and agricultural programs. Forman became an executive board member of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers (LRBW) and the International Black Workers Congress (IBWC) which grew out of the post-Rebellion work of the Black proletariat within the auto plants, service sectors, communities and schools of Detroit.

In 1989, African American **Congressman John Conyers, Jr.** of Detroit submitted House Resolution (H.R.) 40 which would set up a research committee to study the payment of reparations to descendants of enslaved Africans. The bill was reintroduced every year until his departure from Congress. As a result of the mass demonstrations and rebellions of 2020, the bill has gained new life after being voted recently out of committee for the first time in 2021.

These actual historic examples of the demands for reparations must be studied in order to place the contemporary emphasis on localized efforts in their proper perspective. The call for reparations cannot be divorced from the continuing struggles against national oppression, capitalism, imperialism and the need for socialist construction.

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Featured image: James Forman and Lucius Walker issue the Black Manifesto in May 1969

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