

What's "Emancipation Day" to the Caribbean Working-class?

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On 1 August 1838, enslaved Africans in the British Empire won their emancipation from slavery. Emancipation Day is now commemorated throughout the Anglophone Caribbean as a public holiday or national observance. Emancipation was not a gift from Britain or White abolitionists. It came from the accumulated covert and overt acts of resistance by enslaved Africans.

Under the leadership of Jamaica's Sam Sharpe, he and his enslaved comrades made the decision to carry out a general strike if the capitalist enslavers did not pay for the former's labour after 25 December 1831. British colonialism engaged in a show of military force in response to the threat of a general strike.

The insurgents initiated the Emancipation Rebellion on 28 December 1831. The 1831-32 Emancipation Rebellion involved about 60,000 of the island's 300,000 enslaved Africans. They destroyed one hundred and forty-five plantations valued at two hundred thousand pounds (£200,000). Close to two hundred rebels and fourteen whites were killed in the rebellion.

However, this attempt at emancipation from below forced the British to abolish slavery from above by passing the Act for the Abolition of Slavery on August 28, 1833. The legislation took effect on August 1, 1834 with the introduction of the [slavery-like Apprenticeship system](#). It was used to extract 40 1/2 hours per week of free labour from Africans under the guise of preparing them for full freedom in six years.

The "apprentices" were supposed to be paid for 1 1/2 per hours of labour per week after the stipulated hours of unpaid work. The resistance of Africans to the continued exploitation of their labour power and the physical violence of the planters led to Britain's abandonment of the Apprenticeship regime on August 1, 1838.

What is the meaning of Emancipation Day to the African-Caribbean working-class? Emancipation Day sends a clear message to the labouring classes that capitalism exploited their ancestors' labour under chattel slavery and is doing the same to theirs under wage slavery. Capitalism denies African workers the right to control how their labour is used and the fruit of collective work (profit) is distributed.

What is the meaning of Emancipation Day to the African-Caribbean working-class? Emancipation Day is a continued reminder of the need for British imperialism to pay reparations for the enslavement of Africans and colonial exploitation. British imperialism paid twenty million pounds (£20,000,000) to the White capitalist enslavers for losing their

“property” – enslaved Africans. The emancipated Africans did not get a penny for their unpaid labour and inhumane and brutal treatment during slavery.

What is the meaning of Emancipation Day to the African-Caribbean working-class? Emancipation Day is a mocking memo to the African labouring classes that they live in societies in which they do not exercise political power over economic and social policies that impact their lives.

During slavery, the capitalist planters and British colonialism controlled the legislative assemblies and executive power. In the (in)dependent states of the Caribbean, the bourgeoisie or middle-class elements are in full control of the political system – not the masses.

What is the meaning of Emancipation Day to the African-Caribbean working-class? Emancipation Day is an annual announcement to the labouring classes that anti-African racism is still a source of oppression and exploitation in their lives. In countries across the region, people with high stereotypical African features (darker skin, broader nose and thicker lips) are usually clustered at the bottom of society.

What is the meaning of Emancipation Day to the African-Caribbean working-class? Emancipation Day is a painful reminder that working-class African women are still being clobbered by the (un)holy trinity of patriarchy, capitalism and racism. Slavery was a brutal regime of exploitation for enslaved African women. The descendants of enslaved African women are over-represented in today’s unenviable statistics on the indicators of social and economic well-being.

What is the meaning of Emancipation Day to the African-Caribbean working-class? Emancipation Day is closely tied to the idea that the use of liberatory violence might be an effective antidote to the violence of oppression. Emancipation Day is a timely reminder of the fact that collective resistance is the path to changing exploitative conditions.

The Caribbean regimes that celebrate Emancipation Day as a public holiday or national observance have no problem acknowledging the contribution of Sam Sharpe in Jamaica, Bussa in Barbados or Kofi in Guyana, all leaders of armed rebellions. However, the political elite do not sanction the people’s use of violence to deal with the [structural violence](#) of poverty, inadequate housing, sexism, unemployment and underemployment, limited access to education and health care, homophobia and racism.

What is the meaning of Emancipation Day to the African-Caribbean working-class? Emancipation Day is communicating to the masses that they must organize to give birth to the Second Emancipation. This phase of emancipation calls for the elimination of racism, patriarchy, capitalism and other systems of oppression that affect the people’s lives. It also demands the self-organization of the masses.

While it is great for the people to commemorate Emancipation Day, this day must also be used to reflect, critique, assess, deliberate and plan for the next year of struggle. The states across the Caribbean are fine with using [distracting bacchanals/festivals](#) such *J’ouvert* in Antigua and Barbuda, and Anguilla, *Bay Fest* in The Bahamas, and Emancipation Day and *Culturama Day* in St. Kitts and Nevis to divert the people’s attention away from collective political resistance. Toronto’s Emancipation Day-related Caribana festival is used in a non-political manner by civil society forces.

However, it is the responsibility of the revolutionary organizers to use Emancipation Day to strengthen the class consciousness, feminist commitments and anti-racist opposition of the labouring classes. If the organizers are working directly with the people, their day-t-o-day organizing work would be a reflection of the Second Emancipation's programme of action. August 1, 1838 or Emancipation Day tells us that humanity's quest for freedom cannot be smothered by oppression.

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