

union rights



FOCUS ON **Forced Labour**



- Examining legacies of colonialism and slavery
- Forced labour and modern slavery mapped
- Central Asia and forced labour in the cotton sector today

Decolonising and Decarbonising

The recent intervention by Caribbean Labour Solidarity in the debate about decolonising education is not just concerned with formal education in schools, colleges and universities, important as that is. We believe that the voluntary sector is also important and that trade union education is a vital field of activity. My own trade union, University and College Union (UCU) has initiated an educational and campaigning programme entitled ‘Decarbonise and Decolonise’. We believe that this is a significant initiative that other trade unions could do well to emulate as the two issues of climate change and imperialism are inextricably linked. In drawing this to the attention of workers through their trade unions, we hope to contribute to obtaining restitution for ancient injustices and to fighting for a better future for us all. The continued exploitation of the former colonies and peoples of the Third World by the ruling classes of Europe and North America is both a continuation of the old imperialism as well as forming an essential part of the fossil fuel economy that threatens our planet. Nowhere is this truer than the Caribbean.

The 2018 hurricanes Irma and Maria signalled rapidly increasing adverse climate conditions in the Caribbean. The Caribbean is seeing repeated and prolonged droughts, an increase in the number of very hot days, intense rainfall events causing repeated localised flooding, and rising sea levels¹.

The failure of the efforts by the so-called ‘international community’ to deal with climate change can partly be attributed to the domination of the discussions by the old imperialist powers, those who, as representatives of the major historical and current polluters, are mainly responsible for the state the climate is in.

Our campaign attempts to link the origins of European and North American capitalism to a combination of historical factors, all achieved at the expense of the rural inhabitants of Africa, who were enslaved and transported to the Americas, the rural inhabitants of Europe, who were forced off their land and driven into the new industrial cities by enclosures and the First Nations of North America and Australia who saw their land expropriated and were subject to a process of genocide. Thereby, we want to establish that both stopping climate change and reparations for slavery are linked social justice issues.

In Europe and America they stole the land from the people, in Africa they stole the people from the land.

It is now well established that the origin of the current crisis of global warming can be traced back to the widespread adoption of the coal-powered steam engine by the British textile industry in the early 19th Century. Since then the drive for profit has been linked to the vastly increased use of fossil fuels, resulting in massively increased production of greenhouse gases and other pollutants.

Industrialisation in Europe and North America required a primary accumulation of capital, the initial funding that could start the process². This started by driving peasants farmers from their farms and the privatisation of common land that had previously been open to the use of all, processes known as clearances and enclosures³.

Why did the steam engine come to dominate capitalist development in the early 19th Century when water power was readily available and cheaper? There is one major factor: control of labour. Industrialisation needed to turn people into wage workers; by enclosing common land, the law not only enriched the landowners who gained increased holdings, it also rendered independent farming inaccessible to most ordinary country folk, who had previously had access to the commons, and thereby forced many to seek paid employment in the towns⁴.

In a parallel process, the indigenous population of North America and the Caribbean who did not prove amenable to agricultural slavery, were subjected to a process of extermination by a mixture of violence and disease⁵. This freed land for European colonisation, but left those colonists without a labour force to exploit. And so the other component of this expropriation, which started with the seizure of the common land of ordinary country folk in Britain, was the expropriation of the very bodies of ordinary country folk in Africa as they were captured and sold into slavery. The coercion and violence required to operate slave labour was matched by the expansionist war against indigenous people all over the Americas. Thus, systematic violence destroyed subsistence agriculture and forced commodity production, using coerced labour where necessary⁶.

The upshot of all this is the complete dependence of capitalist industry on fossil fuels, with oil added into the package in the 20th Century. Just as employers in the 19th Century moved their operations into the cities to obtain cheap labour, in

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Organised labour in Britain has a common interest with workers in the Caribbean in using the campaign for reparations for slavery to form a constructive, internationalist campaign against climate change

the 21st, they are moving to the Third World in an attempt to avoid the trade union organisation in the metropolitan countries that pushed up wages. The dominance of fossil fuel based power is a consequence of the class struggle and an essential driver in capital's need to extract greater surplus value from labour.

The connection is well illustrated by the origins of the finance that enabled the expansion of the Welsh slate quarries at the end of the 18th Century. In 1781, Richard Pennant inherited the family's estates in Jamaica and in north Wales. He owned four sugar plantations in Jamaica, worked by more than a thousand enslaved workers. The money Pennant generated from sugar and slavery in Jamaica was invested in building road, railway and port infrastructure, as well as expanding the slate industry in Wales, in particular his Penrhyn slate quarry.

Pennant was one of the two MPs for Liverpool, Britain's major slave trading port. He frequently spoke in the Commons against abolition of the slave trade. Thus the Pennant family profited from both slate quarrying in Wales and slave-produced sugar and rum from Jamaica. There is already a plaque in memory of the three-year Penrhyn quarrymen's strike of 1900-03. Perhaps the Welsh government might like to consider another plaque in memory of the hundreds of enslaved labourers who were worked to death on the Pennants' Jamaican plantations.

So, the unjust economic transition brought about by coal-based steam power was initially based on the primary accumulation of capital through a combination of Caribbean slavery, colonial exploitation and the proletarianisation and immiseration of labour in the metropolitan counties. Even after the abolition of slavery in the British Empire, the cotton industry in Britain was still dependent on imported cotton from the USA that was picked by enslaved labour.

Continued slavery in the USA was greatly assisted by investment and loans from the British financial services industry⁷. When discussing the claim for reparations for slavery, we need to look beyond emancipation within the British Empire and consider the profits that British capitalism continued to make from the business of slavery elsewhere.

During the United States Civil War, British textile industry owners, finance capital and aristocracy argued for armed intervention on the side of the slave-owners, while the working class and socialist movement in Britain, despite the hardships caused by the cotton-famine, stood in solidarity with the anti-slavery struggle represented by the northern states and were part of a mass movement against British intervention⁸. It is in this tradition that I would argue for international solidarity in the struggle against climate change.

Presently the Caribbean islands face one of the worst threats of flooding from sea level rises and more violent hurricanes. At the same time,

Caribbean victims of climate change are denied the right to migrate out of the threatened region, while industrial production is moved from the metropolitan countries to the Third World.

The last hundred years has seen a dramatic hardening of borders and restrictions on free movement of labour, while free movement of capital and 'free trade' have become the norm worldwide, making it easy for corporations to move production to ever cheaper locations and to dump their pollution on the Third World. Corporations operate across borders while regulations and workers are contained by them⁹. Oil and mineral extraction as well as pollution is done by corporations unbounded by borders and protected by 'free trade', so the real control of the environment currently rests with those corporations.

This illustrates the fatuous nature of European governments talking piously of reducing their internal outputs of greenhouse gases, while their capitalists are busy exporting production to other parts of the world where they can pollute at their leisure. The actual volume of CO2 emitted does not respect borders. Capitalist profit depends, in large part, in the mobility of production, forever seeking cheaper sources of labour power, which in turn depends on fossil fuel extraction. Thus, any serious attempt to restrict global warming to 1.5°C will necessitate severe restrictions on the free movement of capital.

Some authors have suggested that British workers also gained from slavery thanks to the increased number of jobs in manufacturing. Yet, no one who has read Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* or Frederick Engels' *The Condition of the Working Class in England* can seriously suggest that the British working class gained anything from the development of capitalism at the beginning of the 19th Century.

The profits from Atlantic slavery went, directly or indirectly, to the manufacturers and other suppliers of the slave trade, to the shipping industry, to the construction of infrastructure such as canals and railways, but above all to the financial services industry. Many of today's large banks and insurance companies can be traced back directly to concerns that had their first growth as part of the slave economy¹⁰. It would therefore seem reasonable that these modern firms should refund the unpaid wages from which their predecessors profited so handsomely. Those that did not directly gain, benefited from the investment of slave compensation payments in infrastructure projects that helped the re-orientation of the British economy away from agricultural production towards manufacturing. Given that the majority of the slave-owners' compensation was effectively paid by working people through income tax and indirect taxation on basic necessities, we need to be careful that any

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- 7 D. Byler, *How companies profit from forced labour in Xinjiang*, ASPI, at: <https://xjdp.aspi.org.au/explainers/how-companies-profit-from-forced-labour-in-xinjiang/>
- 8 *Like we were Enemies in a War*, Amnesty International, at: https://xinjiang.amnesty.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/ASA_17_4137-2021_Full_report_ENG.pdf
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- 10 *Like we were Enemies in a War*
- 11 *Against Their Will: The Situation in Xinjiang*, US Dept of Labor, at: <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/against-their-will-the-situation-in-xinjiang>
- 12 I Stone Fish 'Foreign firms under fire for condemning rights abuses in China', Politico (4 August 2021), at: <https://www.politico.com/newsletters/politico-china-watcher/2021/04/07/foreign-firms-face-attacks-for-condemning-rights-abuses-in-china-492397>
- 13 2021 Trafficking in Persons Report, US Department of State, at: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-trafficking-in-persons-report/>
- 14 *ibid.*
- 15 J. Sachs and W. Schabas, 'The Xinjiang Genocide Allegations Are Unjustified', *Project Syndicate* (20 April 2021), at: <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/biden-should-withdraw-unjustified-xinjiang-genocide-allegation-by-jeffrey-d-sachs-and-william-schabas-2021-04>. Schabas, it might be noted, has long maintained a strict line on the formal definition of 'genocide' in law.
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- 17 *Break Their Lineage, Break Their Roots*, Human Rights Watch (2021), at: https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/04/19/break-their-lineage-break-their-roots/chinas-crimes-against-humanity-targeting#_ftn3
- 18 Other than in a footnote where it cites the title of a third party report
- 19 Lehr and Bechrakis, *Connecting the Dots in Xinjiang*
- 20 *Like we were Enemies in a War*
- 21 Lehr and Bechrakis, *Connecting the Dots in Xinjiang*
- 22 Jiang Guangping, Vice Chairman, All-China Federation of Trade Unions, BRICS Trade Union Forum (30 October 2020)
- 23 S. Haiming, *Tainting Xinjiang Cotton cannot be Tolerated: The Research Report on Whether There Exists "forced labor" in Cotton Production in Xinjiang*, Human Rights Institute, Southwest University of Political Science and Law (2021), at: <https://hri.swupl.edu.cn/docs/2021-06/20210614192411348785.pdf>
- 24 2020 third-party monitoring of child labour and forced labour during the cotton harvest in Uzbekistan (ILO, 2021), at: https://www.ilo.org/washington/WCMS_767756/lang-en/index.htm

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reparations for slavery or the cost of combatting climate change are not similarly shifted onto the shoulders of working people¹¹. Let us not forget that many of the working people in the UK are themselves descendants of the enslaved labourers of the Caribbean.

The best way to organise a just system of reparations would be to propose a special, additional corporation tax to fund it, so that the descendent institutions of those who did not pay the enslaved workers their wages now be made to do so. Part of the demand for reparations, in addition to the unpaid wages that were denied to the enslaved, is that European and North American corporations fund the repair of the damage they have done to the ecology of the islands and reverse the fossil fuel driven economy that is causing global warming.

Organised labour in Britain has a common interest with workers in the Caribbean in using the campaign for reparations for slavery to fight the divisive racism in Europe and to right the wrongs of the past. This can form a constructive, internationalist basis for the campaign against climate change.

The argument for a just and fair economy goes hand in hand with saving the planet.

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- 7 Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A New History of Global Capitalism*, Penguin, 2014
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