

United Front Required To Win Reparations

By Ron Daniels
TBWT Contributor
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Reparations to repair the physical, cultural, psychological and spiritual damages done to Africans in America during the holocaust of enslavement is an idea whose time has come. Momentum is building, and though the struggle will still be long and difficult, the prospect of victory is at least now conceivable.

My major caution and concern is that the various forces who have contributed to the extraordinary potential of this moment not squander this opportunity because of internal tensions, bickering, individual and organization egoism and political immaturity. In my considered judgment, what is required at this moment is operational unity and a united front to coordinate a massive multifaceted campaign to win reparations.

The surging momentum developing around the idea of reparations is the result of decades of dedicated struggle by a broad range of leaders, organizations and movements. Many veteran social and political activists like myself were first exposed to the idea of reparations by the great African freedom fighter Queen Mother Audley Moore. I recounted in a recent article how Queen Mother stood in the corridors of the Gary Black Political Convention in 1972, passing out literature and exhorting the participants not to forget "your reparations."

Queen Mother educated hundreds of activists about the definition, rationale and meaning of reparations. President Imari Obadele and The Republic of New Africa have also been relentless in the call for reparations. Los Angeles based activist Robert Brock is another crusader who has criss-crossed the country preaching and teaching about the necessity for compensation for former enslaved Africans. The Nation of Islam has also been a consistent voice in support of reparations. Indeed, by and large, the Nationalist/Pan-Africanist forces have been at the center of the demand for reparations for decades.

One of the most important developments in the last quarter of the 20th century, however, was the creation of a united front type umbrella organization called the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America (N'COBRA). The creation of N'COBRA marked the coming together of a number of organizations and individuals to coordinate the work of pressing for reparations. One thinks of people like "Reparations Ray," Dorothy Benton Lewis, Imari and Jonetta Obadele, Chokwe Lumumba, Adjoa Aiyetoro, Nchechi Taifa, Hannibal Afrik, Kalonji and Kupenda Olusugun, Efia Mwanganza, Dr. James Turner, Ron Walters as among the stalwarts within the leadership and membership of the umbrella formation which more than any other kept the flame of reparations alive and burning when the issue was no where near as popular as it is today. It was the dedicated work of the core of activists and advocates that gathered around N'COBRA that set the stage for the current popularity of the concept of reparations. Among other things, N'COBRA methodically persuaded scores of national organizations and city councils to pass resolutions supporting reparations.

On the legislative front, Congressman John Conyers' introduction of HR- 40 in Congress, the Reparations Study Bill that would create a Presidential Commission to examine the impact of slavery on Africans in America and recommend remedies, has certainly had a galvanizing impact in

terms of provoking debate and discussion about the idea of compensation.

Massachusetts State Senator Bill Owens also created a national stir when he introduced a bill in the legislature demanding reparations for that state's complicity in sanctioning and profiting from slavery. And, as referenced above, scores of city councils across the country passed resolutions supporting the Conyer's bill or reparations in general. In addition, civil rights/human rights leaders like Rev. Jesse L. Jackson have periodically incorporated reparations into their public policy agendas.

The National Black United Front (NBUF), under the leadership of Dr. Conrad Worrill, launched a "We Charge Genocide Campaign," which with the support of the New York based December 12th Movement (D-12), significantly contributed to the popular education of Africans in America about the underlying causes and rationale for reparations. NBUF and D-12 collected thousands of signatures on petitions and presented them to the United Nations. Minister Silas Muhammad and his followers also gathered signatures and took them to the United Nations. In the most recent period, Deadria Farmer-Paellmann broke new ground with her pioneering research on the role of U.S. corporations in perpetuating and/or profiting from slavery (Ms. Paellmann recently sued Fleet Bank, Aetna Insurance Company and CSX Corp. for reparations).

Randall Robinson's powerful book *The Debt* has had an enormous impact in popularizing reparations and creating a comfort level with the idea among African Americans. The Black Radical Congress has adopted reparations as a major part of its program and sponsored a national conference on the subject last year. Chicago Alderwoman Dorothy Tillman also convened a national conference to build support for reparations in 2001. And, newly elected New York Councilman Charles Barron has opened up a whole new front by introducing a Queen Mother Moore Reparations Bill that would examine the City of New York's role in sanctioning and benefiting/profitting from slavery. In addition, Charles Ogeltree and Randall Robinson have assembled a high profile legal dream team that includes Johnnie Cochran and Willie Gary to pursue legal strategies to attain reparations.

Reparations are an idea whose time has come. A recent edition of *USA Today* devoted three full pages to the issue of reparations and the lawsuit that was filed by Ms. Paellmann received major attention in the media. NBUF and D-12 are spearheading a Millions for Reparations Mobilization scheduled for Washington, D.C. August 17, the birthday of Marcus Garvey. The moment is ripe with possibilities. My plea is that a major effort be undertaken to bring all of the forces together to forge a united front to hammer out principles of unity and a coordinated strategy to wage the struggle for reparations in the courtroom, the legislative arena and in the streets. It may be now or never!