



## THE URGENCY AND RIGHTFULNESS OF REPARATIONS: CASH MONEY, ITS IMMEDIATE AND LARGER MEANING

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**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

**I**T IS NO ACCIDENT OF HISTORY, OR INSCRUTABLE reason to be discovered, nor the result of an organized effort that Black people in overwhelming numbers understand and engage reparations first and foremost as the just and urgent receipt of direct cash money payments for damages done and justice due. For them, cash money in the hand is what is needed now and the most urgent, useful and meaningful form of reparations, regardless of other forms it can and must take. Such a position speaks clearly and loudly to the unjust, obvious and disabling disparities of wealth and financial security between Black people and Whites.

But it also reveals and reflects the severity of the sustained suffering of Black people who often and widely lack the money and means to live a life of dignity and decency, to have adequate food, housing, health care and other necessities of life and as we say, to have enough just to make ends meet. Thus, for Black people, reparations, as a compelling justice to be done, is undeniably due, indefensibly delayed and urgently needed now, regardless of other real and bogus considerations.

In the midst of the national liberation struggle, Nana Amilcar Cabral gave the revolutionary cadres going forth to engage and organize the people a lesson central to righteous and successful struggle. He said to them “Always bear in mind that the people are not fighting for ideas, for things in anyone’s head. They are fighting to win material benefits, to live better lives in peace, to see their lives go forward, to guarantee the future of their children.” Now neither Nana Cabral nor Black people deny the power and meaning of ideas to us and others in the world. But there is always a need to turn ideals, ideas and prin-

ciples into a practice and concrete reality whether we talk of freedom, justice, peace, progress or reparations.

Thus, elsewhere he says, “National liberation, the struggle against colonialism, the construction of peace and independence are hollow words and devoid of any significance unless they can be translated into a real improvement in living conditions of the people.” And as I wrote in 1974 on the demands and direction of our liberation struggle, “until men, women and children get beyond the basic three – food, clothing and shelter – until they are assured of survival, they cannot turn their attention and efforts to higher levels of human activity” in ways they would otherwise do. Continuing, I said “Hunger and homelessness are definite limitations on thought, and philosophy comes into being only after there’s a surplus to support it.” And this too, “No, we don’t live by bread alone, but we can only come to this conclusion after we’ve eaten.”

Again then, Black people’s history, cultural and intellectual tradition demonstrate a deep commitment to ideas that ground and orient them and direct their lives toward good and expansive ends. And freedom, justice, equality and power over their destiny and daily lives are central to their lives, thought, commitments and practice. But again, all of this must be translated into conditions that improve their lives and open a horizon toward a good and expansive future for our children and our people. And money and material benefits, money and wealth are essential to achieving these conditions and future.

And so, the struggle for reparations, although a larger project and practice, must soon and substantively yield direct cash payments. But there has been and continues to be

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intense and varied debate and conclusions about what amount this would be in both the USA and California, where the Weber Bill AB 3121 has produced a Task Force to explore this. It has been estimated that to close the “wealth gap” in this country, each African American would have to be paid \$300,000 cash. Certainly, compared to the millions won in court for lesser injuries, this is a paltry sum and what price can justly be put on a single human life, though corporate coldness has set theirs at \$10 million. Still, we know any sum will be contested on the national and state level and considered unrealistic and unmerited.

Let me conclude by noting that even though I stress the urgent need of direct cash payments now, the Kawaida conception of reparations is a larger concept, process and practice. It requires: 1) full communal and a public dialogue around the meaning of reparations and the root injury to be repaired, the Holocaust of enslavement; the savagery of segregation and various other forms of systemic racist oppression; 2) public admission of the Holocaust of enslavement and subsequent and ongoing oppression; 3) public apology by the U.S. government who legalized, protected and perpetuated the Holocaust of enslavement and systemic racist oppression; 4) public recognition through building of monuments and institutions that tell and teach the horror and meaning of this Holocaust and forms of oppression in the public education and university system and the media and other and public venues; 5) compensation, in addition to cash money, a whole list of possible forms: return of land and wealth stolen and seized, free education, healthcare, etc., to be discussed and determined by the community; 6) preventive measures through structural changes achieved through the radical reconception

and reconstruction for this country, through righteous and relentless struggle; and 7) our self-consciously playing our social and moral vanguard role as injured physicians, repairing, renewing and remaking ourselves in the process and practice of repairing and remaking the world that has wounded us.

Let’s face it, this will not be a quick struggle or an easy victory or come without costs, sacrifice, setbacks, diversions and delays, but we will eventually win if we dare to struggle, dare to sacrifice and dare to take it to the end and a new beginning regardless. As we teach, the struggle, both the larger and our smaller ones are dangerous, difficult and demanding. And therefore, as Nana Cabral taught, we must “mask no difficulties; tell no lies and clam no easy victories.”

The evidence of gross injury is there: the Holocaust of enslavement; the savagery of segregation, the deadly and ruinous record of systemic racism; lost lives, freedom, homes, jobs, income, wealth, neighborhoods, land and other property seized and stolen; police violence and viciousness; massive incarceration; divisive and destructive freeway construction pathways; urban “raze and renewal” projects; lack of or inadequate healthcare, housing, education; and the erosion of a strong sense of self-possessive dignity and security of person and place. And all of this was done under the authority, aegis and active involvement of the U.S. and other government and corporate crime partners, and others named and unnamed co-conspirators and perpetrators.

But they will not easily concede and will claim innocence, non-responsibility and even victimhood against the victims of their ill-gotten wealth and power, and the lives they live at our expense – historically and currently. They are too invested in a system

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of racist domination, deprivation and degradation that benefits them economically, politically, culturally and psychologically – even the poor ones, hungry, homeless and howling hate can still say “at least I’m white.” And for the racist and humanity-deprived mind, that’s satisfaction in itself.

So, the struggle must and will continue, and the people, our people, must be respected, believed in, engaged and organized into an undefeatable self-conscious social force for good in the world and allied with other progressive forces in this country and the world. Indeed, as Nana Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune taught, “The measure of our progress as a race is in precise relation to the depth of the faith in our people held by our leaders.” Listen to the people, then, struggle with them to achieve what they need and want out of this project – money in hand and the material basis for living a good and meaningful life. And be willing to realize and face the fact that the truth needs its defenders,

right needs it advocates, and justice and freedom needs its fearless fighters.

**Y**EBO, IT IS ALL A QUESTION OF STRUGGLE regardless of how well reports are written, how cordially or heatedly conversations are held, and how much agreement is achieved concerning the radical evil of racist oppression and the rightness of reparations to correct and end it. Although rightness has a power in itself, in the final analysis to be a living, achieving social force, it must be embodied, given breath, bone and life in the people themselves. For it is not the principle alone that is transformative, but the people themselves who become its head and heart, its arms and legs, its body and strength in motion. Indeed, the social force and future of good and right is rooted in the people themselves, in what they think, feel and fight for, what they justly claim and act audaciously and defiantly to achieve through righteous and relentless struggle.▲

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