



Slavery has been abolished for over 200 years – or has it?

23 Aug 2021

Remembering the Trans-Atlantic slave trade

This blog includes descriptions of the atrocities of the trans-Atlantic slave trade

There aren't many more emotive subjects in society than slavery. [UN Day for the Remembrance of the Slave Trade and Its Abolition](#) is on August 23rd and as a member of the GMB National Race Leads Network I want to share my thoughts.

It is important that we remember history as it happened – unsanitised and through the lens of truth.

Some reports¹ suggest up to 60 million African people died or were enslaved by Europeans and Americans in the 16th and 17th century. Where is the recognition, natural justice, and where are the reparations? But I wouldn't get too excited - the chance of the Tories apologising and paying appropriate reparative compensation for these systematic atrocities is minimal.

In contrast, Germany colonised Namibia at the end of the 19th century. Tens of thousands of Namibian Africans were killed, and recently Germany acknowledged their role in what is now known as a genocide. They agreed a reparation package with the Namibian Government. Our UK government would never do this – instead of adopting responsibility they are likely to push a narrative that this happened a long time ago and that people need to move on.

The following writings are taken from a digital history which documented slave ship journeys:

“Many Africans resisted enslavement. On shipboard, many slaves mutinied, attempted suicide, jumped overboard, or refused to eat. The most recent estimate suggests that there was a revolt on one in every ten voyages across the Atlantic. [...] Many other African captives conspired to escape slavery by running away and forming "maroon" colonies in remote parts of South Carolina, Florida, Brazil, Guiana, and Jamaica, and Surinam.”

An image of large stone sculpted figures in hunched positions in front of the s

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The Anse Cafard Slave Memorial in Martinique

Whilst the trans-Atlantic slave trade came to an end in 1807, there is a new slavery in place today which continues the exploitation of vulnerable people across Europe and Africa. The new face of slavery is in areas including domestic servitude, other forced labour or sex trafficking. This is modern day slavery.

As trade unionists, we have a responsibility to be rigorous in keeping up employment standards in our workplaces and making sure our employers are using responsible and ethical contractors and supply chains. GMB activists passed policy at our 2019 Congress to call on the government to provide better ongoing support when people in the UK are confirmed to be victims of modern slavery.

British trading² in enslaved Africans started in the 1500s. In 1562 Captain John Hawkins was the first known Englishman to include enslaved Africans – 300 people - in his ‘cargo’. Queen Elizabeth approved of this journey and contributed a ship to his later 1564 voyage. The wealth of the UK and its monarchy was, and still is, largely down to cruel exploitation of Africans being forcibly taken from their lands.

About 3,000 British slave-owners received a total of £20m (£1.8bn in today's prices) in compensation when slavery was abolished in 1833³. Among those who received pay-outs were former UK Prime Minister David Cameron’s first cousin six times removed, Gen. James Duff, who received £4,101 as compensation for ‘forfeiting’ enslaved people. In today’s money that is more than £3 million. It’s beyond insulting that slave masters received compensation for losing their slave trade - but for me this explains a lot when we see how black people are

treated today.

My article doesn't even touch the surface of injustice – how race inequality today is clearly linked to what happened well over 200 hundred years ago. Structural racism started a long time ago and is embedded in society today.

Germany does not hide behind its shameful past. It is a shame our UK Government does not face up to the reality of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade - not to mention the riches that came to this country on the back of the blood, sweat and tears the millions of enslaved people.

We remember you all.

1 Source: Digital History, www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/

2 National Portrait Gallery

3 The Guardian, Sept 2015

