

Never forget that thousands of Black workers died building the Panama Canal



Protest in Panama.

Donald Trump declared that if the Panama Canal's tolls for ships passing through it didn't decrease, he would seize the waterway. Trump's fascist rant is like one of Hitler's threats.

Panamanian President José Raúl Mulino Quintero denounced Trump's comments: "Every square meter of the Panama Canal and the surrounding area belongs to Panama and will continue belonging [to Panama]." [Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum](#) also supported Panama's sovereignty.

Listen up, billionaires: the Panama Canal belongs to Panama! This fact isn't just because of geography.

Hundreds of thousands of Panamanians are descendants of those who built the canal. [Between 1904 and 1914](#), the U.S.

Government brought 100,000 Black workers from the Caribbean to cut through miles of rock.

Barbados alone supplied at least 20,000 workers to build the canal. The recruitment reduced the island's population from 200,000 in 1900 to 172,000 ten years later.

Forty percent of Barbados's working-age men were summoned to build the canal. Some historians believe the actual number of [Barbadians](#) who worked on the canal was 30,000 to 60,000. Thousands of Jamaicans and other West Indians were also canal builders.

This work was hell – the previous French effort to build a canal cost [22,000](#) lives.

The official number of those killed from 1904 to 1914 when the U.S.

government was in control was 5,607. Three-quarters of the workers killed – 4,290 – were from the Caribbean. The actual figure may have been much higher.

Just in [1910](#), at least 548 workers were killed. The toll included 167 workers from Barbados, 113 from Jamaica, 49 from Martinique and Guadeloupe, and 60 from other Caribbean islands. In addition, there were 48 workers from Spain, 36 from Colombia and Panama, and 31 from the United States who were killed.

Gold and silver racism

In the same 11-year period, while this industrial murder was going on, at least [702](#) Black people were lynched in the United States.

Along with cranes and dynamite, Uncle Sam exported Jim Crow racism to Panama.

White canal workers were paid in gold, while Black workers

were paid in silver at lower wages. [Housing](#) was completely segregated for decades afterward.

There were no unions or workers' compensation laws to protect employees. Canal authorities agreed in 1908 to supply artificial limbs to some of the workers who were maimed.

Workers had to be found not at fault for their severed limbs. Those injured on trains going to a work site weren't covered.

The A.A. Marks company, located in Brooklyn, New York, boasted in its advertisements that it had sold over 200 prostheses.

As the historian [Caroline Lieffers](#) noted, "The company had aggressively courted the Canal Commission's business, and they were delighted with the payoff."

Yankee colonialism

President Teddy Roosevelt used the U.S. Navy to force the secession of Panama from Colombia. A five-mile strip on either side of the canal cut Panama in two and operated as a U.S. territory for decades.

Panamanians and all of Latin America resented this colonialism. It wasn't until 1963 that the U.S. agreed to display the Panamanian flag alongside the Stars and Stripes.

In January 1964, racist students inside the Canal Zone – supported by their parents – tore down a Panamanian flag. This was like the fascist mob that tried to stop the admission of the Black student James Meridith to the University of Mississippi in 1962.

Twenty-two Panamanian people protesting these bigots were shot down by U.S. troops on [Jan. 9, 1964](#). Every year, the Ninth of January is commemorated in Panama as Martyrs Day.

The United States was forced to cede control of the canal to Panama, although the final turnover didn't take place until

1999. In the meantime, President George H.W. Bush invaded Panama in [1989](#) with 22,000 troops.

While the Pentagon claimed 514 Panamanians were killed, the actual count was over a thousand. Bodies were thrown into mass graves, similar to what is happening in Gaza today. Twenty thousand homes were destroyed.

Bush called this mass murder “Operation Just Cause.” In 2022, Panama’s President Laurentino Cortizo established [Dec. 20](#) – the date of the U.S. invasion – as a national day of mourning.

Only the people can defeat Trump!

None of Trump’s threats should be dismissed as temper tantrums. A large section of the ruling class is behind the wannabe fascist dictator. The super-rich want to privatize the Post Office and gut Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid.

Many of the biggest billionaires, like Microsoft’s Bill Gates and Facebook’s Mark Zuckerberg, congratulated Trump upon being elected president. The leaders of the Democratic Party support the genocide in Gaza just as much as the Christian Nationalist Republicans.

Right now, the wealthy and powerful feel they are on a roll. The conquest and occupation of Syria have sharpened their appetites.

Their role model is the war criminal Netanyahu, who was welcomed rapturously by Congress in July. A courageous exception was

Rashida Harbi Tlaib, the only Palestinian-American member of Congress.

The Pentagon is planning to attack Iran. The People’s Republic of China is the biggest target of the military-industrial complex.

Cuba, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, and Venezuela are also in the Pentagon's crosshairs. Trump wants to deport millions of immigrants.

To stop these monsters, the people's power must be organized. We need to start by flooding Washington, D.C., on Jan. 20 to protest Trump's inauguration as well as building local protests across the country.