

The British working class and the American Civil War: 150 years since London's St. James' Hall meeting

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26 March 2013

On the evening of March 26, 1863—150 years ago today—as many as 3,000 workers packed into St. James' Hall in London for a meeting backing the Union in the American Civil War and praising the Lincoln administration for the Emancipation Proclamation. The gathering was one of the most outstanding episodes of British working-class opposition to the Confederacy and slavery during the US Civil War (1861-1865)—opposition that emerged in spite of persistent efforts by British ruling circles and Southern operatives to blame the Union and Abraham Lincoln for the serious economic suffering caused by war.

The St. James' Hall meeting had been called in the name of the London Trades' Council, for “the purposes of expressing sympathy with the Northern States of America, and in favour of NEGRO EMANCIPATION,” as the bill for the event advertised. While a Quaker mill-owning Member of Parliament, George Bright, chaired, the hall was filled “with the exception of a few guests [by] the members of the working classes,” according to an American diplomat sent to observe, Henry Adams—the remarkable journalist, son of US ambassador to the United Kingdom Charles Francis Adams, great-grandson of John Adams and grandson of John Quincy Adams.

Karl Marx, who followed the American war as a journalist, was present but did not speak. He may have played a significant role in organizing the meeting.

The meeting passed two resolutions and approved a letter to Lincoln. One resolution hailed Lincoln and the Union, declaring that “the cause of labour and liberty is one all over the world,” and further pledged that British workers would fight against the diplomatic recognition of any government “founded on human slavery.” The second condemned the support for the South among British “capitalists and journalists.”

The Letter to Lincoln read, in part:

“Honored Sir: —[O]ur earnest and heartfelt sympathies are with you in the arduous struggle you are maintaining in the cause of human freedom. We indignantly protest against the assertion that the people of England wish for the success of the Southern States... Be assured that, in following out this noble course, our earnest, our active sympathies will be with you, and that, like our brothers in Lancashire, whose distress called forth your generous help in this your own time of difficulty, we would rather perish than band ourselves in unholy alliance with the South and slavery.

“May you and your compatriots be crowned with victory; and may the future see the people of England and their brothers of America marching shoulder to shoulder determinedly forward, the pioneers of human progress, the champions of universal liberty.”

In a letter to Friedrich Engels, Marx noted that workers who rose at the meeting “spoke excellently, with a complete lack of bourgeois rhetoric and without in the least concealing their opposition to the capitalists.” Minutes of the meeting support this. An individual named Odger, a shoemaker, said that workers could not support a government that sought “to keep four millions of their fellow creatures in endless bondage.” Mantz, a compositor, declared that in England not “a hundred workmen could be found to meet together to justify a recognition of the Southern Confederacy, even on the ground of employment for the distressed operatives of Lancashire (Hear, hear.)” Cremer, a joiner, said that the Confederacy had “thrown down the gauntlet to the free labourers of the world.” Heap, an engineer, said that the meetings’ resolutions “would find an echo in the breasts of the working classes throughout the country.”

Charles Francis Adams sent copies of the resolutions and an official report to the State Department, which then forwarded these to northern newspapers. Articles appeared in Northern publications in April 1863, under the headline “VOICE OF WORKING-MEN OF LONDON.” Lincoln, who had written directly in response to a similar meeting held earlier in Manchester, this time responded through Adams that the “Trade Unionists have spoken the voice of the people of Great Britain.” Biographer Carl Sandburg would later note the novelty of Lincoln’s replies to the mass meetings of British labor: “It was not a custom for the ruling heads of nations to address letters to ‘workingmen’ in other countries.”

The role of the British working class in the American Civil War was indeed novel, and powerful, on many levels.

When Confederate leaders determined to pull their states from the Union in the immediate aftermath of Lincoln’s inauguration in 1861, and then to precipitate the Civil War by attacking federal installations in the South, they calculated that Britain and France would gravitate toward diplomatic recognition, which very likely would have led to war. The Lincoln administration was fearful of this possibility, and for good reason.

The South’s cotton, produced by slave labor, had fueled Britain’s industrialization—or, conversely, Britain’s

industrialization had generated the “Cotton Kingdom” of the South, and with it a dramatic growth and expansion of slavery. In 1860 over 80 percent of Britain’s cotton came from the South of the US; and Britain was the recipient of the lion’s share of all Southern cotton production. Though “white gold” was not the only important American link to the British economy—Britain was also dependent upon grain exports from the antislavery American Northwest—cotton created a powerful economic relationship.

Just as important, the European ruling classes remained deeply hostile to the republican experiment across the Atlantic. With Europe in the grip of reaction following the defeated revolutions of 1848, the US was, in Lincoln’s words, “the last, best hope” for democracy. The British and French ruling circles identified with the Southern elite; their newspapers propagandized against the Union and Lincoln. Britain manufactured warships for the South, granted it belligerent status, and came to the brink of a diplomatic rupture with the North over its naval blockade. For his part, Louis Napoleon used the American Civil War to install a puppet regime in Mexico.

The Southern elite calculated that the Cotton Famine would propel the British toward diplomatic recognition and then war, and presumed that British workers would play a role in this by protesting mass unemployment. Indeed, the South itself imposed an embargo on cotton exports to accelerate this process. Early in the war a Southern leader told the *London Times*, “We have only to stop shipment of cotton for three months and a revolution will occur in England. Hundreds of thousands of your workers will starve without our cotton, and they will demand you break the blockade.”

The response of the British working class astonished observers. Even in Lancashire, where unemployment approached 50 percent, the working class repeatedly expressed its hatred of slavery and its solidarity with the North, especially after Lincoln’s release of the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation in September 1862. As Henry Hotze, a Southern spy working in Britain noted, “The Lancashire operatives [are the only] class which as a class continues actively inimical to us... With them the unreasoning...aversion to our institutions is as firmly rooted as in any part of New England.”

On December 31, 1862, the day before the Proclamation’s implementation, large meetings in support were held in Manchester and London. In 1863 British workers held 56 pro-Union meetings, according to historian Royden Harrison; meanwhile attempts by pro-Southern agents to organize competing meetings “invariably failed,” in the words of historian Philip Foner.

The British ruling class, in its support of the South and in its bitter opposition to the Emancipation Proclamation—which it viewed correctly as an invitation to “servile insurrection”—was at least in part restrained from its proclivities by the working class. Marx put great emphasis on this fact, writing Joseph Weydemeyer in 1864 that the “monster meeting in St. James’ Hall” had “prevented [Prime Minister Lord] Palmerston from declaring war on the United States, as he was on the point of doing.”

The powerful demonstration of working-class solidarity with the Union and the slaves also nourished a spirit of internationalism

developing among the most advanced English workers and helping to set the stage for the founding of the First International (or the International Workingmen’s Association—IWA) the following year in London.

Marx, who was elected to the IWA General Council, wrote the organization’s Inaugural Address, which included the statement that it was “the English working class that saved the West of Europe from plunging headlong into an infamous crusade for the perpetuation and propagation of slavery on the other side of the Atlantic.”

In late 1864 Marx was tasked by the IWA with drafting a letter congratulating Lincoln on his reelection. Marx wrote:

“The workingmen of Europe feel sure that, as the American War of Independence initiated a new era of ascendancy for the middle class, so the American Antislavery War will do for the working classes. They consider it an earnest of the epoch to come that it fell to the lot of Abraham Lincoln, the single-minded son of the working class, to lead his country through the matchless struggle for the rescue of an enslaved race and the reconstruction of a social world.”

This was also received by Charles Francis Adams and conveyed to Lincoln. In return, Adams delivered Lincoln’s personal thanks and added that the Union derived “new encouragements to persevere from the testimony of the workingmen of Europe that the national attitude is favored with their enlightened approval and earnest sympathies.”

Notes:

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The International Workingmen’s Association 1864 “Address of the International Working Men’s Association to Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States of America.” http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/iwma/documents/1864/linc_oln-letter.htm



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