

How the British workers' movement helped end slavery in America

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One hundred and fifty years ago, Abraham Lincoln led the Union of northern states to victory against the slave-holding southern Confederacy in the American Civil War of 1861–1865. This “Second American Revolution” resulted in the abolition of slavery in America, the largest expropriation of private property in world history prior to the Russian Revolution.

The Confederacy wagered that British workers would rise up against the “cotton famine” caused by the Union blockade of Southern ports, and that this, combined with British ruling class sympathy for the South, would compel a British and French intervention against the Union. Instead, the overwhelming opposition of British workers to slavery proved a critical factor in preventing British recognition of the Confederacy.

There was a close economic relationship between British industrialisation and the American South’s slave economy. Raw cotton, harvested by slaves, was transported to Britain, where it was spun and woven into cloth, Britain’s dominant export during the 19th century. Baled cotton arrived from America’s southern states at the port of Liverpool and supplied an expanding network of mill towns across the Lancashire region, with Manchester the industrial hub. By 1860, there were 2,650 cotton mills employing 440,000 workers in the region.

Manchester’s explosive economic growth was driven by unfettered capitalist exploitation. It became the world’s first major industrial city and was dubbed “The workshop of the world” and “Cottonopolis.”

As capitalism developed and Manchester grew, so did the working class. Friedrich Engels, Karl Marx’s co-thinker, wrote *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, published in 1845, while working at his father’s Manchester factory. He examined the inhuman conditions endured by the toiling masses in various branches of industry and explained their root cause in the capitalist social order. Engels called Manchester the “classic type of a modern manufacturing town.”

For the working class, bourgeois social relations ensured that every step forward met with brutal opposition from the ruling class. In one infamous incident, a mass movement demanding democratic reforms was repressed in the 1819 “Peterloo” Massacre at St. Peter’s Field, Manchester. Cavalry charged a crowd of 80,000 workers, killing 15 and injuring hundreds.

The pinnacle of working class political consciousness in this period was Chartism, the first revolutionary movement of the working class, named after the “People’s Charter” and its six demands for parliamentary reform.

Chartism’s revolutionary wing was rooted in the masses and managed to wrest limited concessions from the ruling class in the mid-1840s, such as the ten-hour working day and the repeal of the Corn Laws. However, the Chartist movement, which preceded Marx’s development of scientific socialism, was ultimately undone by its socially and politically inchoate character. As Trotsky noted, “Chartism did not win a victory not because its methods were incorrect, but because it appeared too soon.”

With the demise of Chartism, the masses entered a protracted period of political passivity under the sway of moderate trade unions. However, its

revolutionary traditions were rekindled with the outbreak of the American Civil War.

The Union blockade and the cotton famine

The Confederacy believed their dominant position in world cotton markets guaranteed the support of their trading partners, France and Britain. Their reactionary hubris was typified by South Carolina Senator James Hammond, who warned, “What would happen if no cotton were furnished for three years? I will not stop to depict what everyone can imagine, but this is certain: old England would topple headlong and carry the whole civilized world with her. No, you dare not make war on cotton. No power on earth dares to make war upon it. Cotton is king!”

Fears that it might draw Britain into war on the side of the South notwithstanding, Lincoln began the Union blockade of southern ports in April 1861—the so-called “Anaconda Plan” to encircle and suffocate the Confederate economy. Although many British ships penetrated the blockade, it choked off 95 percent of cotton exports.

Britain’s 1.1 billion-pound annual supply of Confederate cotton dried up. Prices exploded and only small amounts of inferior cotton could be imported from elsewhere. Lancashire was gripped by the cotton famine. The region’s mills were shuttered and thousands lost their jobs across the country.

Workers faced poverty, starvation, lack of heating and eviction. Riots erupted across the country. In the depths of the cotton famine, 60 percent of Lancashire workers were unemployed. Thousands were forced to rely on the hated, demeaning Poor Law system. While speculators profited by hoarding cotton, the ruling class cracked down on unrest and used charity and religion to calm popular anger.

The biggest riots erupted in Stalybridge, one of the worst affected mill towns. Most factories had closed, over 7,000 mill operatives were unemployed, and three-quarters of workers were dependent on international aid. Protests erupted against the government’s miserly relief schemes.

The riots were brutally suppressed. Cavalry were brought in and local police equipped themselves with cutlasses and bayonets. Over 80 men were arrested in the repression.

The Confederacy calculated that the cotton famine would force workers to back them. A Southern politician told *The 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.”

However, they were undone by Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation, first announced in September 1862. This proclaimed that all slaves in the Confederate states, 3.1 million of the 4 million slaves in the US, were

freed without compensation to the former owners. It also ordered the Union Army to “recognize and maintain the freedom” of the ex-slaves. This made abolition an explicit war aim.

In Britain, workers had a deep-rooted hatred of slavery and knew that the last hands to touch the cotton were those of slaves in the Confederate states. Despite bearing the enormous hardship of the cotton famine, a popular nationwide anti-slavery campaign erupted in support of Lincoln, the Union and the blockade.

Workers maintained support for the Union throughout the war. Mass meetings were held in towns and cities across the country.

Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation won firm support from the St. James’ Hall meeting called by the London Trades’ Council and held in London on March 26, 1863. Over 3,000 workers packed into the hall to express solidarity with Lincoln and “sympathy with the Northern States of America, and in favour of Negro emancipation.” One man declared, to cheers from the audience, that 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.”

Workers condemned British “capitalists and journalists” for their support for the Southern states. The meeting, Marx believed, “prevented [Prime Minister Lord] Palmerston from declaring war on the United States, as he was on the point of doing.”

The British bourgeoisie distrusted “Yankee democracy” and sought to preserve their profitable trading relationship with the South. Britain remained officially neutral throughout the Civil War. However, as relations with the North grew strained, British mill owners urged the use of the Navy to break the blockade. Britain built and sold warships to the South and even prepared to invade by deploying troops to Canada, a move blocked by popular opposition.

The British ruling class knew that the abolition of slavery would encourage the working class to rebel against their own wage slavery. Ship and mill owners organised public meetings to mobilise support for the Confederacy. They were addressed by hacks who blamed the Union for the suffering of the textile workers.

These efforts proved futile.

The workers’ fight against capitalism was bound up with the struggle for the abolition of slavery. Recognising the common plight of slaves and working people, a London trade union meeting declared that “the cause of labour and liberty is one all over the world,” and opposed the diplomatic recognition of any government “founded on human slavery.”

Karl Marx wrote in *Capital*, “In the United States of North America, every independent movement of the workers was paralysed as long as slavery disfigured part of the Republic. Labour cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded.”

British workers were conscious of their shared stake in the great democratic revolution being fought on battlefields across the Atlantic Ocean. Another public meeting condemned the “tyrannical faction [the Confederacy] that is at this very moment in rebellion against the American republic and the sworn enemy of the social and political rights of the working class in all countries.”

In Britain, two years after the Union victory in the American Civil War, the Second Reform Act enfranchised some workers for the first time and doubled the electorate. The passage of the act was inconceivable without the impact of the American Civil War and the movement it engendered, which stoked the bourgeoisie’s fear of revolution. Trotsky later observed that the “revolutionary victory on American territory gained the vote for a section of the British working class (the 1867 Act.)”

The workers’ intervention in the Civil War demonstrated the revolutionary potential of the working class. Marx explained that it “was not the wisdom of the ruling classes, but the heroic resistance to their criminal folly by the working classes of England that saved the west of Europe from plunging into an infamous crusade for the perpetuation and

propagation of slavery on the other side of the Atlantic.” He called the movement “brilliant proof of the indestructible staunchness of the English popular masses.”

The anti-slavery movement was a historic step forward for the international workers’ movement. Marx said: “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 enshamed race and the reconstruction of a social world.”

The working class was entering the stage of world history. As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted last year on the 150th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation: “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 helped to set the stage for the founding of the First International (or the International Workingmen’s Association—IWA) the following year in London.”

The impact of Chartism and the anti-slavery movement reverberated across the world. Both movements portended a new era in world history. Their potential would be fulfilled with the victory of the Russian Revolution half a century later.

Lincoln in Manchester

This heroic tradition is commemorated by the statue of Abraham Lincoln that stands in Manchester today. Lincoln never set foot in the city, but the British workers’ role there in the war for the destruction of slavery brought them and the “Great Emancipator” together.

A meeting held at Manchester’s Free Trade Hall on December 31, 1862 sent a message to Lincoln that is now engraved on the plinth below the Lincoln Statue in the city. It states that “the vast progress which you have made in the short space of twenty months fills us all with hope that every stain on your freedom will shortly be removed, and that the erasure of that foul blot on Civilisation and Christianity—chattel slavery—during your Presidency will cause the name of Abraham Lincoln to be honoured and revered by posterity. We are certain that such a glorious consummation will cement Great Britain and the United States in close and enduring regards.”

In a demonstration of sympathy for the distressed British workers, America sent three relief ships loaded with food funded by public subscriptions. Lincoln thanked the workers for their support in a message read to large crowds that welcomed the first relief ship, the *George Griswold*:

“I know and deeply deplore the suffering which the working people of Manchester and in all Europe are called to endure in this crisis. It has been often and studiously represented that the attempt to overthrow this government built on the foundation of human rights, and to substitute for it one that should rest exclusively on the basis of slavery, was likely to obtain the favour of Europe.

“Through the action of disloyal citizens the working people of Europe have been subjected to a severe trial for the purpose of forcing their sanction to that attempt. Under these circumstances I cannot but regard your decisive utterances upon the question as an instance of sublime Christian heroism which has not been surpassed in any age or in any country. It is indeed an energetic and re-inspiring assurance of the inherent truth and of the ultimate and universal triumph of justice,

humanity and freedom.

“I hail this interchange of sentiments, therefore, as an augury that whatever else may happen, whatever misfortune may befall your country or my own, the peace and friendship which now exists between two nations will be as it shall be my desire to make them, perpetual.”

This text is also engraved below the Manchester statue of Lincoln.

The statue was commissioned over a century ago, the task falling to American sculptor George G. Barnard (1863-1938). He created a number of expressive likenesses, the product of devoted work over a number of years. The results, in particular, the six-foot-tall statue that stands in Manchester today, are moving.

Barnard strove to capture Lincoln’s persona, announcing, “I shall give future generations the *real Lincoln*.” He was determined to convey Lincoln as he was *before* taking office, a “Lincoln for the People,” wearing worn-out, common clothes. He modeled Lincoln’s body after an unemployed railway worker with a similar physique who lived in Kentucky, not far from Lincoln’s birthplace. “I have seen the models of Europe—men of Greece and Italy—symmetrical and beautiful in a classical way, but nothing ever impressed me like the form of this Kentuckian,” said Barnard.

Barnard worked long hours for five years to create an artistic masterpiece. The 3.5-metre-high monument was finished in 1917 and deeply moved its viewers. Historian Harold E. Dickson said, “Each of its carefully studied and treated parts contributes to a totality of striking characterization: very large feet, long limbs in trousers that bulge at the knees, the homely gesture of hand clasping wrist across a flat stomach, the sharply sloping shoulders, and, poised on a long neck, the eloquent head, expressively imbued with qualities of strength, wisdom, gentleness, and unassuming pride.

“Bluntly and astringently naturalistic, devoid of elegance and of pretensions to factitious nobility, this is Barnard’s ‘mighty man who grew from out the soil and the hardships of the earth’ to become champion and symbol of democracy. Above all, it is a visual record of findings in the course of what its creator simply and truthfully called ‘my journey in the heart of Lincoln.’”

Barnard had run afoul of his paymasters. As US imperialism prepared to enter the First World War, calls arose for castings of Lincoln to be sent to the European capitals as a symbol of the fight for “democracy,” as part of the campaign by the American bourgeoisie to paint their imperialist appetites in bright colours.

The American social elite loathed Barnard’s “warts and all” approach. They saw in the statue only “radicalism in rags,” a disreputable person, a “slouch” and a “hobo.”

They denounced Barnard’s *Lincoln* in the press, provoking a stormy debate. Barnard was unshaken. He said to his wife during the controversy, “Don’t worry over talk about the Lincoln statue. It is a great work and nothing can change it.”

After the heat died down, it was sent to England alongside an existing, more “statesman-like” statue, lifeless and dour, which was erected in Parliament Square, London.

In Britain, despite *The Times* describing Barnard’s statue as resembling “a tramp with colic,” it found a home in industrial Manchester, the former “workshop of the world,” where it was placed in Platt Fields Park in 1919. It was relocated to Lincoln Square in the town centre in 1986 and the engraving was restored in 2007 for the 200th anniversary of the abolition of slavery in Britain.

Manchester’s Lincoln monument stands as a testament to the powerful, broad-based anti-slavery sentiment and incipient internationalism among British workers.

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To contact the WSWS and the
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