

Racialist campaign in Boston culminates in removal of statue of Lincoln and emancipated slave

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On December 29, city officials removed from downtown Boston a famous statue of Abraham Lincoln and an emancipated slave that has stood for 141 years. This politically reactionary act was the culmination of a campaign, including a petition drive, carried out by racialist elements linked to the Democratic Party.

On July 1, the Boston Art Commission voted unanimously for the removal of the statue. Upon removal of the monument last Tuesday, the city announced that it will be put into storage pending determination of a new location.

The statue, called the “Emancipation Group,” is a bronze recasting of the Freedmen’s Memorial by Boston artist Thomas Ball. The original is located in Washington D.C.’s Lincoln Park.

Contrary to the claims of its racialist detractors, the statue, paid for by subscriptions from former slaves, cannot by any objective standard be characterized as racist or demeaning. It depicts the abolition of slavery in the US, which Lincoln and over 360,000 Union soldiers paid for in blood.

It features Lincoln, his hand over the Emancipation Proclamation, and a freed slave, his shackles broken, crouched in a runner’s stance with the key to his chains in his hand. The granite base of the statue, all that remains after Tuesday’s removal, bears an inscription that reads: “A race set free and the country at peace. Lincoln rests from his labors.”

Frederick Douglass, the famous African-American abolitionist, gave a powerful speech acknowledging Lincoln’s greatness at the dedication of the monument in 1876.

Following the removal of the monument, complete with blue cloth coverings over the heads of the

subjects, the Democratic mayor of Boston, Marty Walsh, released a statement expressing his satisfaction “to have taken it down this morning.”

Walsh justified the removal on the basis of the monument’s supposed “role in perpetuating harmful prejudices and obscuring the role of Black Americans in shaping the nation’s fight for freedom.” His statement ended with a promise “to continue the public conversation,” and “begin a series of virtual panel discussions and short-term art installations examining and reimagining our cultural symbols, public art and histories.”

The petition to remove the monument, which gathered roughly 12,000 signatures in a city of over 694,000 people, was falsely cited by the mayor’s Office of Arts and Culture and the Boston Art Commission as evidence of broad public support for its removal. In reality, the lackluster support for the tearing down of the monument within the population speaks to the egalitarian and democratic principles that are strongly held by millions of workers and youth.

It is politically significant that the push to take down the statue intensified last spring in the midst of demonstrations across the US and internationally against the May 25 police murder of George Floyd. The protests were marked by the participation of millions of people of all races, ethnic backgrounds and nationalities. The mass outpouring of social anger and opposition, directed in the first place against police violence and racism, reflected a more general and profound indignation over social inequality, militarism and all of the evils of capitalism, exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic and the refusal of the ruling class to take any serious measures to contain it and save

lives.

Trump and the Republicans responded to the mass protests with open hostility and calls for more widespread repression, including Trump's June 1 unleashing of federal military police against peaceful protesters in Washington D.C. and his threat to impose martial law and deploy active-duty troops across the country to crush the demonstrations. They portrayed the demonstrations as part of a "socialist" and "terrorist" plot and encouraged far-right and fascist vigilantes to attack anti-police violence protesters.

For their part, the Democrats sought to defuse the movement by means of racialist politics, doubling down on their efforts to define all social ills as the result of ingrained and permanent white racism, promote divisions within the working class, and obscure the fundamental dividing line in capitalist society—socio-economic class.

The Democratic Party and its media allies, led by the *New York Times*, encouraged attacks across the country on public monuments to historical figures who played leading roles in the American Revolution and the Civil War, such as Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Ulysses S. Grant and a number of white abolitionists.

In a Perspective column published by the *World Socialist Web Site* last July, titled "Hands off Lincoln and the Emancipation Memorial! Defend the legacy of the Civil War!", we wrote:

Those know-nothings who would spit on Lincoln—who deny his fundamental role in the destruction of slavery in the United States and dismiss the key importance of the Emancipation Proclamation as the document that sounded the death knell of slavery for all time—find themselves on the side of the murderer [John Wilkes] Booth and the forces of political reaction.

Those who spearheaded the campaign to remove the monument in Boston, including a number academics and black nationalists, denounced the monument as "racist" and "condescending." In mounting this campaign of historical falsification and slander, they

were taking their lead from the *New York Times* and its "1619 Project," which declared the year 1619, when African slaves first landed in North America, to be the true founding of the United States, rather than 1776, when revolutionists in Britain's North American colonies issued the Declaration of Independence, proclaiming that "all men are created equal."

At a public hearing that was held before the Boston Art Commission this past spring, a number of promoters of racialist politics denounced the monument, characterizing it as racist. Among those who spoke in defense of the monument were Cedric Turner, the great-great-great grandson of Archer Alexander, the freedman depicted in the monument, and Dorris Keeven-Franke, Alexander's biographer.

The removal of the statue in Boston will be used by Democratic politicians in Washington D.C. to press for the removal of the original in the nation's capital. The Democratic representative for Washington D.C. in the House of Representatives, Eleanor Holmes Norton, has promised to submit legislation to take down the Freedmen's Memorial.



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