WORKERS AGAINST SLAVERY

THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR, THE FIRST INTERNATIONAL AND THE BRITISH WORKING CLASS

A WORKERS' LIBERTY PAMPHLET

BY SACHA ISMAIL

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"Labour cannot emancipate itself in a white skin when in the black it is branded."

Karl Marx on post-Civil War America, in *Capital* (1867)

"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 headlong into an infamous crusade for the perpetuation and propagation of slavery on the other side of the Atlantic."

Inaugural Address of the International Working Men's Association (1864)

"Why should the Lancashire labourers sympathise with the labourers in the Southern States? Why should they not, like the economists, argue that the slavery of Alabama is a part of the complex labour system by which they live, and wish it to go on? Why not assume the languid indifference of the upper classes as to the result of the great struggle? Perhaps it is... because, possessing little more than our common humanity, [we] prize that above artificial distinctions of class and colour."

Public statement from a workers' mass meeting in Manchester (1862)

TIMELINE

1850s

US politics convulsed by issue of slavery; breakdown of old party political system, rise of Republicans; armed clashes over whether Kansas will be slave or free state

1859

Abolitionist John Brown attempts to lead slave uprising at Harpers Ferry, Virginia

1860

November: Republican Abraham Lincoln elected President
December: South Carolina secedes from US

1861

Six other Southern slave states secede, Confederate States of America formed, soon grows to eleven states
April: Civil War begins, slaves start to flee to US army
August: US Congress passes first anti-slavery war measures
November-December: *Trent* crisis seems to threaten US-British war
December: British workers' meetings in support of US begin

1862

Summer: Congress, led by Radical Republicans, pushes US policy in more radical anti-slavery direction
Second half of year: Wave of workers' meetings in Lancashire
22 September: Lincoln issues Emancipation Proclamation promising to free slaves in Confederate states
November: Recruitment of black soldiers begins tentatively
31 December: Great meeting at Free Trade Hall in Manchester, meetings in London

1863

1 January: Emancipation Proclamation comes into effect, recruitment of black soldiers massively accelerates
26 March: "Monster" workers' meeting at St James' Hall, London

1864

September: Foundation of International Working Men's Association
November: Lincoln re-elected

1865

April-June: Confederacy surrenders
14 April: Lincoln assassinated by Confederate sympathiser
December: Thirteenth Amendment to US Constitution ratified, slavery abolished throughout US

1867

"Radical Reconstruction" begins in US, enfranchising ex-slaves; Reform Act enfranchises over a million British workers

Exiled from a number of European countries, **Karl Marx** (1818-83) settled in London in 1849. In the 1850s he remained active, working with other German socialist refugees and with left-wing survivors of Chartism, but solidarity with the Polish and American struggles signalled a new phase of more intense activity for him, particularly after the founding of the International Working Men's Association. He saw the US Civil War as a decisive turning point and support for the North and the destruction of slavery as crucial.

INTRODUCTION

In the 1860s, an internationalist and anti-racist struggle – support for the battles against black slavery in America – was central to the revival of the British labour movement, and to the creation of the International Working Men's Association, the "First International".

In the American Civil War (1861-5), the horrific system of chattel slavery was brought down by the interlinked class struggles of the Northern United States' industrial capitalists, leading millions of small farmers and workers, against the South's slave-owning planter class; and of the slaves against their owners. This is the story of a third class struggle: the fight of Britain's workers' movement against British capitalists who wanted to help the slave-owners win.

In the aftermath British workers pushed forward towards winning the vote and a political voice, even as they were helping America's ex-slaves do the same. This is a political legacy socialist, working-class and anti-racist activists can learn from and be inspired by today.

In November 1864, Karl Marx wrote to his uncle Lion Philips in the Netherlands:

"…in September the Parisian workers sent a delegation to the London workers to demonstrate support for Poland. On that occasion, an International Workers' Committee was formed. The matter is not without importance because… in London the same people are at the head who organised the gigantic reception for [Italian nationalist revolutionary] Garibaldi and, by their monster meeting… in St James' Hall, prevented war with the United States."

The International developed out of growing working-class organisation and politicisation in a number of European countries, in part through solidarity with democratic struggles around the world.

Foremost of these struggles was Poland – support for Polish independence from Russia, Austria and Prussia, and solidarity with the 1863-4 Polish uprising for national liberation and agrarian revolution. The second, perhaps equally important, was America.

If Poland provided the impetus for the creation of the First International, the American anti-slavery struggle and Civil War strongly contributed to the political conditions that made it possible.

BRITAIN AND THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

In January 1861, as the Southern slaveholders' Confederate States of America was about to come into being, Marx wrote to his friend Friedrich Engels that he believed resistance and revolt by Southern slaves was, along with unrest among Russia's serfs, the "biggest thing happening in the world today".

Once the war began, though, he feared the result of Confederate independence would be the reorganisation of not just the South, but the whole of North America on the basis of unfree labour, gradually reducing many white workers as well as black to something like slavery. Historical progress, if not stopped, would be set back dramatically.

The United States had many advantages over the Confederacy: population, industrial base, economic dynamism. Yet for the first year of the conflict, at least, it was not clear who would win. One factor favouring the Confederacy was that its immediate war aim was defence of its own territory. Another that seemed on the cards was support from foreign governments. During the war France's dictator Emperor Louis-Napoleon sent troops to Mexico to overthrow its US-allied republican government, and installed a French puppet monarch supported by the Confederacy.

The British Whig/Liberal government of Viscount Henry Palmerston was also complicit. In 1861, aware of divisions in the ruling class and unsure of public opinion, the deeply elitist but wily Palmerston manoeuvred and took small steps. Both Britain and France recognised the Confederacy as a belligerent power, giving it various rights in international relations, and one stop short of officially recognising its government. A blind eye was turned to the illegal building of Confederate warships in Britain: after the war an international tribunal would award the US $15,500,000 in damages for such secret British support for the Confederacy. At various points prominent figures including Foreign Secretary Lord John Russell put forward proposals ranging from "mediation" to stop the war to outright military intervention in favour of the Confederacy, and Palmerston discussed such proposals with Louis-Napoleon.

The Confederacy had representatives and agents in Britain to win over official and public support, secure recognition and obtain military intervention. In December 1861, Marx summarised the situation in the *New-York Daily Tribune*:

"The wish uppermost in the minds of the slavocracy… was always to plunge the United States into a war with England. The first step of England as soon as hostilities broke out would be to recognise the Southern Confederacy, and the second to terminate the [North's naval] blockade."

Palmerston and his government, including future Prime Minister William Gladstone, claimed to be anti-slavery, so why did they favour a regime explic-

itly founded to protect and promote it? Marx's explanation of this hypocrisy in an 1861 letter to German socialist Ferdinand Lassalle was clear, simple and materialist:

"They are the same fellows who wearied the world with their anti-slave trade philanthropism. But – cotton, cotton."

The same year the satirical British magazine *Punch* carried a jingle: "Though with the North we sympathise / It must not be forgotten / That with the South we've stronger ties / Which are composed of cotton." Later in 1861, Marx elaborated for the *Tribune*:

"As long as the British cotton manufacturers depended on slave-grown cotton, it could be truthfully asserted that they rested on a two-fold slavery, the indirect slavery of the white man in England and the direct slavery of the black man on the other side of the Atlantic."

The Civil War was in part a struggle over what kind of agriculture would dominate the vast territories of the American West as they were settled – free commercial farming fuelling the growth of the industrial capitalism in the North (in competition with Britain), or Southern-style slave plantations producing staple crops for the world market (including cotton for the British textile industry).

Much of the British ruling class, though it had no love for slavery as such, did feel it had a vital interest in the outcome: hence support for the Confederacy. This fitted well with their hostility to democracy and desire to see the world's one large and previously stable republic fail, weakening the threat of a revived struggle for democracy in Britain. Most of the British press, including the *Times*, the *Economist* and the *Guardian*, echoed these views.

Future Tory Prime Minister Robert Cecil, who hung a portrait of Confederate general Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson in his Hertfordshire stately home, was central to setting up "Southern Clubs" to agitate on the side of the Confederacy, and they received support and funding from a number of large employers, particularly in the North West of England.

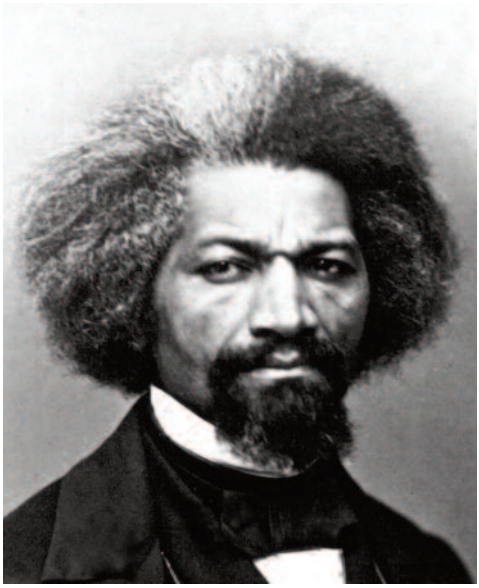
Many bourgeois and aristocratic figures with anti-slavery reputations were nonetheless hostile to the North and sympathetic to the Confederacy – for instance, Samuel Wilberforce, Bishop of Oxford and son of the famous but in fact deeply reactionary anti-slavery campaigner William Wilberforce. Such attitudes were so prevalent that the long-established "British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society", which had links to the Foreign Office, the House of Lords and the Royal Family, refused to take a stand on the war. Its leader, Lord Brougham, repeatedly and violently attacked the US government, denouncing its eventual emancipation measures as "hostility to the whites... the extermination of one race to liberate the other".

Britain was by far the world's strongest naval power – if it did intervene, the

Confederacy's chances of winning independence would be greatly strengthened. In November-December 1861, agitation for a British-US war rose to its high point when the US navy stopped a British ship, the *Trent*, carrying two leading Confederate diplomats across the Atlantic. The press and a majority of Parliament howled for military action. The thousands of troops Palmerston had dispatched to Canada were put on alert as the Secretary of State for the Colonies told the Canadian Governor General to prepare for war.

A war did not happen, then or later. Aside from the fact that US government defused the *Trent* affair by backing down and releasing the Confederate agents, many other things militated against it. Cotton was not Britain's only important import and textiles not its only important industry; large parts of the British economy had links to the US. In addition to the minority of the ruling class who sympathised with the North, not all those who supported the Confederacy were in favour of intervention – Gladstone being a prominent example. Both major parties, Whigs/Liberals and Tories, were divided. Even those who did want war were not necessarily confident about the outcome. US military victories from 1862 made Palmerston, in particular, back off.

Yet for a while things hung in the balance; the main body of the British ruling class was clearly pushing to step up aid for the Confederates, and at several points until late 1862 war or at least some sort of escalation of British



Born a slave in Maryland, **Frederick Douglass** (1818-95) escaped when he was twenty and went on to become a leading activist and orator for the abolition of slavery, as well as other causes including women's rights. He toured Britain and Ireland, speaking to huge audiences, in 1845-7, and returned to Britain in 1860. His propaganda during the Civil War, reproduced by left anti-slavery activists, had a significant impact on British working-class opinion. He continued to be a leader in the fight for black liberation in America until his death.

support looked highly possible. One element tilting the balance against intervention was wider public opinion, and in particular the stand taken by the organised working class.

WORKERS AGAINST SLAVERY

You might have thought, as many did at the time, that British workers would support or accept war against the US.

In addition to the noises coming from the government and ruling class, many of them, and particularly textile workers in regions like Lancashire, suffered appallingly as a result of the war, as the dependable supply of cotton ceased and swathes of British industry froze up. "English intervention in America has therefore become a bread-and-butter question for the working class", wrote Marx in the Vienna newspaper *Die Presse* in January 1862. "In addition, no means of inflaming its anger against the United States is scorned by its 'natural superiors'."

Unemployment in the Lancashire textile areas went from near zero in November 1860 to something like 330,000, about 50 percent, two years later. It was still 240,000 in December 1863 and 170,000 a year after that. In a society without a welfare state, millions of people in Northern England were reduced to grinding poverty. Many tens of thousands of "cotton operatives" (textile workers) struggled to get food or heating, or were evicted from their homes.

Mill-owners took the opportunity to depress wages and lengthen the working day for those who stayed in work, with many also backing the propaganda campaign which said that only Confederate independence would end this dire situation.

British workers were expected to play the role of providing popular support for war against the US. "The working class is... fully aware", commented Marx in *Die Presse*, "that the government is only waiting for the intervention cry from below, the pressure from without, to put an end to the American blockade and the distress in England". At the start of the war a Confederate leader had boasted to 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."

What would British workers' response be? In the early 1860s the British workers' movement was weak, as it had been since the defeat of Chartism in the late 1840s. As the economy grew in the 1850s, trade unions got bigger and more stable, but in this generally conservative decade they were not very politi-

cally radical. The Lancashire operatives had been involved in many mass mobilisations, with peaks of struggle in 1819, 1842 and 1848, but less and less so after that. Before the crisis of 1862, their wages had gone up and quiet seemed to have settled on the textile industry.

Many of the best established trade union leaders refused to support the North or even sympathised with the Confederacy – for a range of reasons, including tailing the ruling class, racism, illusions that the Confederates were fighting a national liberation struggle, but also because of viewing most anti-slavery activists as bourgeois or petty bourgeois hypocrites unmoved by the suffering of workers in Britain.

This was also true of most papers and journals which claimed to speak to and for the working class. It was true of the best known publication aimed specifically at workers, *Reynolds' Weekly Newspaper*, and even for a period of the London trade union paper the *Bee-Hive*, which would later become the official organ of the First International!

In Lancashire, pro-Confederate capitalists hired former radicals and working-class activists who had more recently been involved in arguing against strikes to propagandise for the slaveowners' cause among workers.

Rather than defending slavery explicitly, defenders of the Confederacy generally argued that it was not at stake in the war, or even that Confederate independence would help the slaves win their freedom. Such arguments were made more plausible by the fact that, for the first year of the conflict, the US government's concern for property rights and fear of social upheaval made it reluctant to take decisive steps to destroy slavery.

No doubt some workers were taken in. But the propagandists were frustrated by their inability to make a real dent in solidly pro-Northern views in the British working class – even among the Lancashire textile workers. A Confederate agent who had travelled to Britain from Alabama, Henry Hotze, wrote back to his bosses: "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" (the most strongly anti-slavery part of the US).

The response was similar all over Britain. As Marx put it in the *Tribune* (January 1862):

"Simple justice requires to pay a tribute to the sound attitude of the British working classes, the more so when contrasted with the hypocritical, bullying, cowardly, and stupid conduct of the official and well-to-do John Bull."

Pro-Confederate union leaders and journals "seem to have been increasingly out of touch with their following", as a TUC pamphlet issued for the 1960 centenary of Abraham Lincoln's election and the creation of London Trades Council explained. How did the British workers resist so much pressure, including

From a minor aristocratic background, **Ernest Jones** (1819-69) nonetheless became a leading figure in Chartism, British workers' movement for the vote and political power, at the age of 27. In 1848 his speeches resulted in two years in prison for sedition; he would devote his entire life to the struggle and die in poverty. A poet and novelist, he wrote a large amount of widely-praised literature for the movement. He helped give late Chartism a more clearly socialist direction and was close for a while to Marx and Engels, though he later became more moderate. By the 1860s his authority among British workers was enormous and he used it to rally support for the anti-slavery fight in America, particularly in Lancashire.

from within their own organisations?

Britain had a long history of anti-slavery campaigning. Slavery had been illegal inside Britain since 1772; after big campaigns, the British Empire abolished the slave trade in 1807 and slavery itself in the 1830s and 1840s. The British state worked to suppress the slave trade and sometimes slavery in other countries. The British ruling class did these things in part under the pressure of slave revolts and in part out of commercial calculation – it saw the writing on the wall and thought its foreign rivals had more to lose than it did from the end of slavery. A potentially revolutionary struggle like the US Civil War was another matter, particularly when it might hurt the interests of British capital.

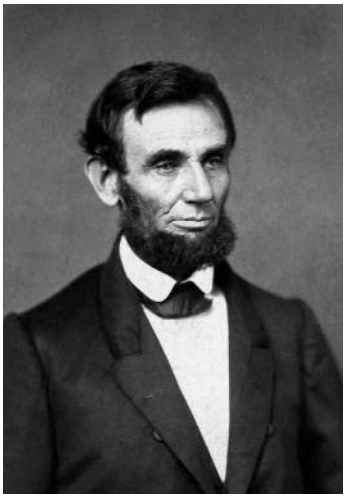
But large numbers of workers and middle-class people took widespread anti-slavery ideas more seriously. Part of British workers' radical tradition was specifically working-class campaigns against slavery in the early 19th century. Many in Britain, as in other European countries, also admired the US as the most democratic society in existence, and wanted to see it continue. As the American conflict set the world alight, such attitudes solidified into defiance and then blossomed into a living struggle.

Even before workers began to organise, nervousness about working-class public opinion seems to have contributed to ruling-class hesitance about intervention. In the last weeks of 1861, reaction against the jingoist agitation surrounding the *Trent* affair pushed workers into action. The first working-class anti-war/anti-slavery meetings took place in December; by January Marx was claiming in *Die Presse* that "the anti-war movement among the English people gains from day to day in energy and scope" and joking that the *Trent* affair was now a *casus belli* (case for war) "not between England and the United States, but between the English people and the English government".

The resolution from a January 1862 "London Workers' Meeting" in Marylebone which Marx reported on declared:

"Therefore this meeting considers it the particular duty of the workers, since they are not represented in the senate of the nation, to declare their sympathy with the United States in its gigantic struggle for maintenance of the Union, to denounce the base dishonesty and advocacy of slaveholding indulged in by the Times *and kindred aristocratic journals, to express themselves most emphatically in favour of the policy of strictest non-intervention in the affairs of the United States... to protest against the war policy of the stock-exchange sharks, and to manifest the warmest sympathy with the endeavours of the [American] Abolitionists to bring about a final solution of the question of slavery."*

By 31 January Marx explained the changing, more pacific tone in the pro-Confederate press by arguing that "the attempt at such an intervention would overthrow the ministry". Palmerston must have remembered the protests which helped defeat his Conspiracy to Murder Bill, aimed against radical politi-



Despite his poor background, **Abraham Lincoln** (1809-1865) held conservative views on property as well as on race. Picked as the anti-slavery Republican Party's candidate for President in 1860 because he was part of its right wing, his election nonetheless brought America's long-running crisis over slavery to a head and triggered the secession of the Southern slave-owning states. During the Civil War, pressure exerted by slave resistance and by the Radical wing of his party pushed him slowly to the left and he became popular among British workers. He was assassinated by a Confederate sympathiser as the war ended.

The **4th United States Colored Infantry** in 1865. When the war began, the US government turned away black volunteers ("This is a white man's war") and returned runaway slaves to their owners. From 1862, emancipation measures and the recruitment of over 170,000 black men, mostly ex-slaves, as soldiers signalled the coming of something like the "revolutionary war" Marx called for and dramatically shook up American society.

cal refugees, in 1858, resulting in his resignation as Prime Minister and being out of office for a year.

In 1862, the political climate in the US radicalised as it became clear that the North could not win the war without seriously attacking slavery. Lincoln's government reeled and reoriented under the impact of Confederate victories, slave resistance and the growing strength of anti-slavery movements – movements in which radical workers who had arrived in America as refugees from Europe, particularly Germany, played an important part. The "Radical" left wing of the governing Republican Party, which included even a few socialists like German refugee, US army colonel and friend of Marx Joseph Weydemeyer, put moderates like Lincoln under mounting pressure to carry out decisive anti-slavery measures.

Step by step, the North started to fight something more like what Marx called a "revolutionary war" instead of a "constitutional" one, tying its fate to that of the Southern slaves and freeing larger and larger numbers. As these shifts took place, British public opinion heated up and anti-slavery and pro-Northern activity by British workers escalated.

THE VOICE OF LANCASHIRE

In the second half of 1862 a series of pro-Northern working-class rallies – something like a combination of public meetings and demonstrations, usually attended by many hundreds or even thousands – swept across Lancashire and Yorkshire.

These meetings adopted anti-slavery and pro-US resolutions unanimously or by overwhelming majorities, denouncing any sort of British intervention in support of the Confederacy.

When pro-Confederate campaigners attempted to hold meetings, they were often taken over by hostile workers who passed anti-slavery resolutions. In July 1862, for instance, something like four thousand people attended an outdoor meeting in Blackburn called to demand British "mediation" of the war, a step towards recognising the Confederacy. Of those, all but twelve voted for an amendment from the secretary of the town's Weavers' Association turning the motion into an anti-slavery and pro-Lincoln one. The meeting then passed another motion condemning the organisers! Things like that took place in town after town.

The climax of this wave was a meeting of six thousand people, overwhelmingly workers with many cotton operatives, in Manchester's Free Trade Hall on 31 December 1862 – the day before Lincoln's "Emancipation Proclamation", legally freeing three million slaves in the Confederacy and authorising the recruitment of black soldiers, came into effect. Called by mill-worker John Edwards and former Chartist leader Edward Hooson in the name of working-class activists in the city, this meeting agreed and published resolutions which stated:

One of the 13,236 barrels of flour transported on the *George Griswold* as relief for starving workers in Lancashire.

"This meeting, recognising the common brotherhood of mankind and the sacred and inalienable right of every human being to personal freedom and equal protection, records its detestation of negro slavery in America… thus forever renouncing that unworthy prejudice which refuses the rights of humanity to man and woman, on account of their colour… Justice demands for the black, no less than whites, the protection of the law…"

And:

"Why should the Lancashire labourers sympathise

with the labourers in the Southern States? Why should they not, like the economists, argue that the slavery of Alabama is a part of the complex labour system by which they live, and wish it to go on? Why not assume the languid indifference of the upper classes as to the result of the great struggle? Perhaps it is... because, possessing little more than our common humanity, [we] prize that above artificial distinctions of class and colour... whatever others think is to be said for the slaveowner, in [our] eyes his offence is the greatest man can commit against man, the sum and parent of all villainies. Let it be known at Richmond [the Confederate capital in Virginia] that whatever favour the Southern oligarchy have found in England, our working classes understand their cause."

A black American named William Jackson, who had previously been a slave to Confederate President Jefferson Davis, was in the audience, and addressed the meeting to cheers after cries from the floor for him to speak.

The organisers explained that they had been driven to organise the gathering in part by the pro-Confederate position of the *Manchester Guardian*. The *Guardian* poured scorn on them and expressed a wish that no more working-class meetings on this issue should take place in the city. Its editors must have been disappointed, because 24 February 1863 saw another, even bigger event at Free Trade Hall, with two thousand people unable to get inside; the participants once again passed radical anti-slavery and anti-racist resolutions.

The occasion was the arrival of an American relief ship, the *George Griswold*, crammed with food and provisions for hungry workers in Lancashire. One of its passengers was Philadelphia trade union leader Jonathan Fincher, who spoke at meetings all over Britain and took the facts of British workers' support for the North back home with him.

Out of the first Manchester meeting was born the Union and Emancipation Society, which was central to the second meeting and whose influence soon spread across the country. This was a network involving left-leaning middle-class and even bourgeois figures left homeless by the betrayal of the official "anti-slavery" Society, but mainly made up of workers and with a distinct radical character, explicitly linking the struggle in America to the fight for democratic rights in Britain. Its activists and speakers included many women and a number of black people living in Britain.

The new society organised three hundred and fifty meetings of various sorts during the Civil War.

THE VOICE OF LONDON

Lancashire continued to be a centre of anti-slavery agitation, with numerous mass meetings taking place through 1863 and into 1864, but the movement grew across Britain.

Between December 1861 and the end of the Civil War in April 1865 many dozens of mass meetings/demonstrations took place across the country, from Brighton to Edinburgh – even in previously pro-Confederate Liverpool, built on the slave trade. Two took place in London on New Year's Eve 1862, at the same time as the first Manchester Free Trade Hall meeting.

Marx, always ready for a swipe at his own people, lamented to Engels that workers in Germany had not organised similar demonstrations, despite the big role German workers and soldiers were playing in America: "Germany would be justified in making them, as it has contributed more to the Yankees than France did in the eighteenth century. It is the old German stupidity".

The resolutions and reports from British workers' meetings show that this was not just an anti-war movement but a positively anti-slavery and even anti-racist one. In fact the pace of activity accelerated after the war danger had definitely passed. Most meetings took place in 1863, by which time British intervention was out of the question.

Most important was the meeting Marx cited to his uncle – the 26 March 1863 meeting in St James' Hall, Piccadilly, organised by London trade unionists. The St James' Hall meeting may not actually have "prevented war with the United States", but it had enormous significance nonetheless.

This gathering, attended by about three thousand people, heavily made up of skilled workers, was addressed by a new generation of left-wing union leaders. It was chaired by radical liberal MP John Bright. Bright, a small manufacturer, was emphatically not a socialist, had opposed strikes, and two decades later would oppose self-determination for Ireland. In 1863, however, he was one of a very small number of MPs campaigning for workers to have the vote. After the meeting he was attacked and jeered in Parliament for taking part in it.

In his opening remarks, Bright pointed out that trade unions could not function in a slave society, and condemned the position taken by a majority of his class:

"Privilege thinks it has a great interest in it [the struggle in America], and every morning with blatant voice it comes into our street and curses the American Republic... Privilege has shuddered at what might happen to old Europe if this great experiment should succeed."

The workers present passed an address to Lincoln which urged him to complete the task of destroying slavery, arguing that the American Civil War had

"…opened the gates of freedom to millions of our negro brothers who have been deprived of their manhood by the infernal laws which have so long disgraced the civilisation of America… like our brothers in Lancashire… we would rather perish than band ourselves in unholy alliance with the South and slavery."

This is how Marx, who was present, described the meeting to Engels:

"I attended the meeting held by Bright at the head of the trade unions. He looked quite like an Independent [a Puritan revolutionary in the 17th century English Revolution] and every time he said "In the United States, no kings, no bishops", there was a burst of applause. The workers themselves spoke excellently, with a complete lack of bourgeois rhetoric, and without in the least concealing their opposition to the capitalists..."

All this would have great consequences for working-class politics in Britain and beyond. Consider what a startling thing had happened. In late 1861, as the US government struggled to save itself without completely smashing the slave system, a war by Britain to defend the Southern slave-owners had loomed. By 1863, as the American Civil War became a revolution against slavery, it was impossible – thanks at least in part to the anti-slavery stand taken by British workers. This is how Lincoln himself described it:

"I never knew anything truer than their conduct. They knew that to get cotton would be to them to get work and food. Their instinct would be to break through the blockade and get the cotton. But they could not allow their instinct to override their consciences."

As the former Chartist leader Ernest Jones, who played a crucial role in this campaign, put it:

"Those base planters [the Southern slave-owners] did not know what English workingmen were made of… The people had said there was something higher than work, more precious than cotton, more glorious, indeed, than a satisfied stomach – it was right, and liberty, and doing justice, and bidding defiance to all wrong."

RENEWING THE LABOUR MOVEMENT

By the end of 1864 the writing was on the wall for the Confederacy and for American slavery. "Never has such a gigantic upheaval taken place so rapidly", Marx told his uncle. "It will have a beneficent effect on the whole world."

He was right. The end of slavery in 1865 would lead to a huge growth of struggles by working people – by the former slaves in the South and by a newly confident working-class movement in the North (most of it, unfortunately,

much less advanced on questions of racism than the British movement). Meanwhile the campaign by British workers in support of the fight against slavery – in defiance of the ruling class and its government, enormous material pressure and many of their own leaders – led to a new birth of working-class politics in Britain too.

Workers' campaign around the Civil War was not only a success in terms of mass mobilisation on a scale not previously possible. It also involved the British labour movement in new kinds of political issues and activity widely seen as controversial or unacceptable during the more conservative period of the 1850s, and brought new, more progressive leaders to the fore.

The speakers on the night of the St James' Hall meeting had made that quite clear. Heap, the engineering worker who seconded the address to Lincoln, joked in his speech that nobody could any longer say trade unionists had "no sympathy with non-society [un-unionised] working men... for no one could deny that the negro labourer was a non-society man". George Odger, shoemaker and secretary of the London Trades Council, used his speech to link anti-black racism in America to anti-Irish racism in Britain.

T.J. Mantz of the compositors' (typesetters') union said that "he did not believe a hundred workmen could be found to meet together to justify a recognition of the Southern Confederacy, even on the ground of finding employment for the distressed operatives of Lancashire". He also made the essential point about the meeting: "trade unionists were determined at last to take an interest in political questions".

Edward Beesly, a University College London academic close to the unions (and Marx) who had helped to organise the meeting, made the same point:

"We are met here tonight, we say it openly, not merely as friends of Emancipation, but as friends of Reform [extending the franchise, and more generally social change]. This is the first time, I believe, that the Trades' Unionists of London have met together to pronounce on a political question… but I am sure it will not be the last."

St James' Hall was a political triumph for a new layer of trade union leaders who had emerged in the fight to build the first large, stable unions of skilled workers in the 1850s, using relatively militant tactics in strikes and struggles in industries including engineering and construction. In London they cooperated closely, running the Trades Council which they had formed in 1860.

These new labour movement leaders wanted to campaign on political questions like winning workers the vote and international solidarity. The American campaign was an important stage in their political development. The organisations and connections activists had built in a quieter period came into their own when big events stirred people up in the 1860s.

Trade unionists who had supported the St James' Hall meeting used it push back those who argued unions should not be political, and to marginalise those

who wanted the labour movement to take regressive positions – particularly on the American Civil War. The influence of union leaders who had refused to support the US anti-slavery struggle was severely weakened. George Troup, who as editor London Trades Council paper the *Bee-Hive* had published pro-Confederate propaganda, was forced out of office and after a row the paper began publishing reports, analysis and positions in line with the solidarity campaign.

Similar developments took place elsewhere. In Edinburgh, for instance, the trades council had been divided on whether to organise a meeting, but the success of the large meeting it did hold in February 1863 greatly weakened the influence of pro-Confederate Scottish labour movement organisers and press.

In Ireland, anti-slavery trade unionists built links with trade unions in New York and used them to challenge widespread anti-black racism among Irish workers there.

THE BIRTH OF THE FIRST INTERNATIONAL

The links between working-class veterans (mainly old Chartists), radical middle-class intellectuals and a new layer of politicised labour movement activists which had developed through the fight against American slavery came to fruition in British involvement in the creation of the International Working Men's Association, in 1864.

The wider background was growing capitalist development, and with it workers' organisation, in many European countries, particularly France, where working-class pressure forced some loosening up of Louis-Napoleon's police state and created openings for workers to make international links.

The growing interconnectedness of the European economy led to attempts to move strike-breakers across borders. For instance, European workers were imported during strikes for the nine hour day in the London building trade between 1859 and 1861. In the live political atmosphere of the early 1860s, the increasing use of foreign scabs met with a push on the part of British workers' organisations to use international solidarity to resist.

Bread and butter issues became entwined with wider questions of international solidarity, particularly the Polish and American struggles. In October 1863, a proclamation drafted by Marx for the German Workers' Educational Society in London called for German workers to side with Poland's ongoing national revolt by reminding them of the anti-slavery stand of British workers:

"The English working class has won immortal historical honour for itself by thwarting the repeated attempts of the ruling classes to intervene on behalf of the American

slaveholders by its enthusiastic mass-meetings. . . . If police restrictions prevent the working class in Germany from conducting demonstrations on such a scale for Poland, they do not in any way force them to brand themselves in the eyes of the world as accomplices in the betrayal, through apathy and silence."

When French workers' leaders visited London to discuss solidarity with the Polish struggle in the summer of 1863, they also discussed the need for international links to prevent cross-border strike-breaking.

Afterwards, the same British trade unionists involved in the American campaign, issued a statement, "To the Workmen of France from the Working Men of England", which argued:

"A fraternity of peoples is highly necessary for the cause of labour, for we find that whenever we attempt to better our social conditions by reducing the hours of toil, or by raising the price of labour, our employers threaten us with bringing over Frenchmen, Germans, Belgians, and others to do our work at a reduced rate of wages; and we are sorry to say that this has been done, not from any desire on the part of our continental brethren to injure us, but through a want of regular and systematic communications between the industrious classes of all countries, which we hope to see speedily effected, as our principle is to bring up the wages of the ill-paid to as near a level as possible with that of those who are better remunerated, and not to allow our employers to play us off one against the other, and so drag us down to the lowest possible conditions, suitable to their avaricious bargaining."

These links led, in September 1864, to a great international meeting at St Martin's Hall in Covent Garden of a wide variety of working-class and radical activists from countries including Britain, France, Ireland, Poland, Italy and Germany. The First International was born. Marx joined the new organisation's London-based General Council, bringing with him other activists who had been in the German Communist League around the revolution of 1848.

Some of the International's first activities were successful attempts to stop strike-breaking – for instance making international links to block the use of scabs from Germany in the London tailors' strike of 1866. If it had done nothing but that, argued Robert Applegarth, General Council member and secretary of the carpenters' union, it would have been a real achievement:

"But it had done more. It had enlarged the views of English trades' unionists, and showed them that trade unions could be used for higher purposes than simple wage-quarrels, and that an international union was necessary to attack the evil that oppressed them at the root."

From the late 1860s, as Britain's rulers sought to incorporate a partially-enfranchised working class into bourgeois political life and the organised labour movement became hegemonised by the Liberal Party, many of the trade union leaders involved in the International would move right. In the early 1860s, however, they were moving left, as part of a definite working-class tide. The

decade saw anti-racist and also republican ideas make major headway among British workers.

The American Civil War prepared the way for this broadening of horizons. British trade unionists had played a leading role in the campaign. Although French workers could not organise open mass meetings under the dictatorship, many of them had also suffered as a result of the conflict, and had the experience of opposing their government's pro-slavery designs in the name of American solidarity.

In the "Inaugural Address" Marx wrote for the International – which discussed various aspects of working-class politics, including unions, cooperatives, public ownership, the fight for reforms but also workers' attitude to foreign policy, attempting to educate this rather amorphous movement in basic socialism – he highlighted the significance of the Civil War:

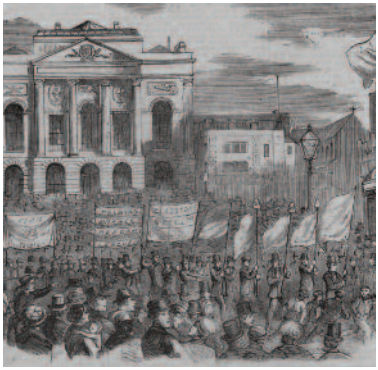
"If the emancipation of the working classes requires their fraternal concurrence, how are they to fulfil that great mission with a foreign policy in pursuit of criminal designs, playing upon national prejudices, and squandering in piratical wars the people's blood and treasure? It was not the wisdom 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 headlong into an infamous crusade for the perpetuation and propagation of slavery on the other side of the Atlantic."

The war was still going on, and the International made continued solidarity with the American anti-slavery cause one of its main focuses. In its January 1865 public address to Lincoln it declared: "The workingmen of Europe feel sure that, as the American War of Independence [1775-1783] initiated a new era of ascendancy for the middle class, so the American Anti-slavery War will do for the working classes".

The Paris Commune, in which Civil War veterans would take part, was only six years away!

ENFRANCHISING LABOUR, BLACK AND WHITE

In May 1865, London saw the last great British working-class meeting on the Civil War, called to congratulate the American people on the end of the Confederacy and send condolences for the assassination of Lincoln.



Mass demonstration for universal male suffrage organised by the National Reform League, 1867.

The chair of that meeting argued to great cheering that the measure of success in America was "not merely to knock the fetters off the slave, but to give him the rights of citizenship".

But of course British workers lacked many of those rights, including the right to vote, too. As the chair of the Manchester meeting to welcome the *George Griswold* had put it succinctly, they were fighting for "enfranchising black labour in America and... enfranchising white labour in England". It was widely noted at the time that Free Trade Hall stood on the site of the "Peterloo Massacre" of textile and other workers demonstrating for the vote in 1819, when troops killed fifteen workers and injured many hundreds. The Lincoln memorial meeting in London closed with determined calls for a campaign to win British workers the franchise.

Chartism, of course, had focused on the call for workers to have the vote, but after its defeat in the late 1840s such demands faded. In the new political environment, they revived. London Trades Council had begun a campaign for universal male suffrage and the secret ballot in 1862, and from its inception the International popularised these demands. The North's victory in the US Civil

On 16 August 1819, cavalry charged into a crowd of 60,000 people, mostly workers, who had gathered at St Peter's Field, Manchester, to demand an extension of the vote. Fifteen people were killed and about five hundred injured. The massacre was given the name "Peterloo" as an ironic comparison to the Battle of Waterloo four years earlier. Peterloo was an important political memory for working-class activists and widely referred to during the anti-slavery and suffrage struggles of the 1860s.

The cover of New York magazine *Harper's Weekly*, showing black men in the South voting for the first time, in 1867, as Radical Republicans overturned the conservative post-war reconstruction policy of Lincoln's successor Andrew Johnson. Black political rights did not last long, but while they did they posed the possibility of a dramatic social transformation of the South. 1867 was the year the vote was won for many British workers too.

War, supported by the British working class, gave the fight for democracy in Britain a massive boost.

It undercut the idea that popularly elected governments were bound to fail in a crisis. Inspiring pride and elation among workers, it embarrassed and demoralised the British ruling class, particularly when Lincoln astonished them by replying publicly to the pro-US resolutions of British working-class meetings. The campaign had strengthened working-class organisation and showed that, united and mobilised, workers could win, not only on economic but on major political issues.

All this was widely acknowledged. As writer James Heartfield puts it:

"By taking a stand on the international question of the American Civil War, the British working classes did not only stop Palmerston and Russell's schemes, they also changed themselves. Speaking out so decisively on the war, the workers became a force to be reckoned with, as everyone in authority noticed. The argument over the war turned overnight into an argument about workers' right to be heard in Britain."

In 1865 Palmerston, a militant opponent of conceding the vote to workers, died; the year after, a somewhat repentant Gladstone cited workers' stance on America in Parliament, as evidence of why the franchise should be widened.

In 1867, the Reform Act enfranchised large numbers of British workers for the

first time – possibly a majority of the (male) urban working class. In 1872 the secret ballot was introduced and in 1884 another act enfranchised many workers in the countryside, so that 60 percent of adult men could vote. The limits are obvious – the poorest men, and all women, would not get the vote until more than half a century after the Reform Act. Moreover, the immediate result was a strengthening of Liberalism. It would take decades more, the spread of socialist ideas, and revolt and organisation among 'unskilled' workers in the 1890s to put independent working-class representation on the agenda.

Nonetheless, the democratic reforms enacted from 1867 represented a dramatic change. Between 1865 and 1885 the UK's population increased by about 20 percent; the number of voters by 430 percent, a more than five-fold increase. 855,000 people voted in Palmerston's last general election, in 1865; in 1868 2,332,000; in 1885 4,531,000.

Although the 1867 Act fell far short of the International's demands, its members were central to the powerful campaign, mobilising many thousands in mass meetings and militant demonstrations, which made it possible.

The strength of the National Reform League, which organised grassroots campaigning to extend the franchise, was based on hundreds of trade union affiliations throughout Britain – and all six of the trade unionists who sat on its national committee were members of the International and had been active in support of the North during the American Civil War.

SOLIDARITY

The same year many British workers won the vote, the ex-slaves were enfranchised by the Radical Republicans.

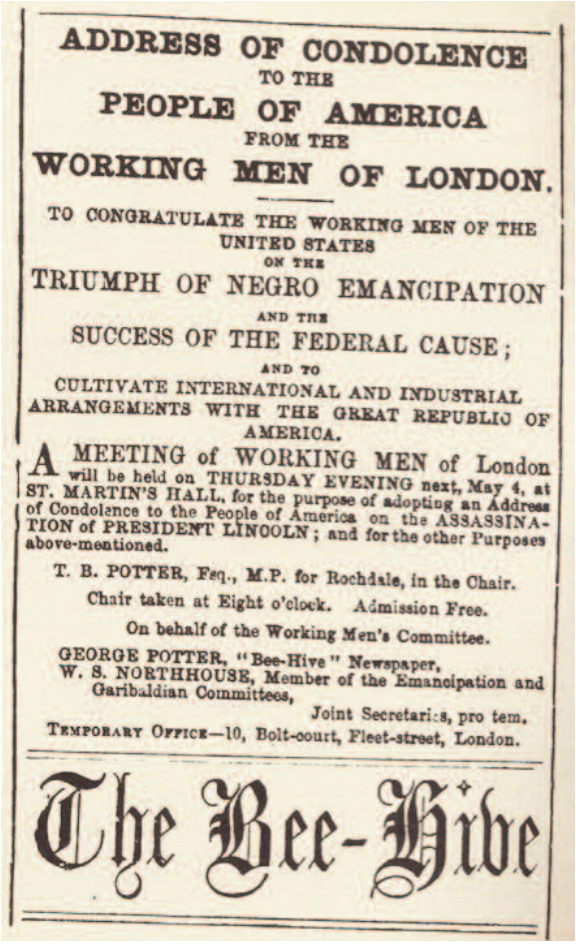
With the US "only now really entering the revolutionary phase" (Marx), a vast class struggle was unleashed in the former Confederacy, as black workers used their newfound political freedom to limit their exploitation and fight for ownership of the land they worked on.

In the 1870s, betrayed by a Northern capitalist class concerned with order and property, this struggle was defeated. The period of "Radical Reconstruction" would prove to be a relatively short opening before decades of disenfranchisement and brutal segregation. But while it lasted the International Working Men's Association, based in London but now organised across the world including the US, made solidarity with the former slaves' fight for liberation. In September 1865 it issued a political address to the American people, presciently warning:

"Injustice against a fraction of your people having been followed by such conse-

quences, put an end to it. Declare your fellow citizens from this day forth free and equal, without any reserve. If you refuse them citizens' rights while you exact from them citizens' duties, you will sooner or later face a new struggle which will once more drench your country in blood.

"We therefore admonish you, as brothers in a common cause, to sunder all the chains of freedom, and your victory will be complete."



ADDRESS OF CONDOLENCE
TO THE
PEOPLE OF AMERICA
FROM THE
WORKING MEN OF LONDON.

TO CONGRATULATE THE WORKING MEN OF THE UNITED STATES
ON THE
TRIUMPH OF NEGRO EMANCIPATION
AND THE
SUCCESS OF THE FEDERAL CAUSE;
AND TO
CULTIVATE INTERNATIONAL AND INDUSTRIAL ARRANGEMENTS WITH THE GREAT REPUBLIC OF AMERICA.

A MEETING of WORKING MEN of London will be held on THURSDAY EVENING next, May 4, at ST. MARTIN'S HALL, for the purpose of adopting an Address of Condolence to the People of America on the ASSASSINATION of PRESIDENT LINCOLN; and for the other Purposes above-mentioned.

T. B. POTTER, Esq., M.P. for Rochdale, in the Chair.

Chair taken at Eight o'clock. Admission Free.

On behalf of the Working Men's Committee.

GEORGE POTTER, "Bee-Hive" Newspaper,
W. S. NORTHHOUSE, Member of the Emancipation and Garibaldian Committees,
Joint Secretaries, pro tem.

TEMPORARY OFFICE—10, Bolt-court, Fleet-street, London.

The Bee-Hive

Advert in the *Bee-Hive* for the last great meeting of British workers during the American Civil War.

American slaves picking cotton. Emancipations during the Civil War and the final abolition of slavery in 1865 meant the confiscation of three billion dollars of property in 1860s prices, with no compensation, and the liberation of four million people *from being property*.

WHAT TO READ

In a hundred pages, Philip Foner's 1981 book *British Labor and the American Civil War* tells the story of British workers' enthusiastic mobilisations, as well as the upheaval they produced in the labour movement, in rich detail. He also destroys attempts by many bizarrely well-respected historians to claim the whole thing was an invention or myth.

James Heartfield's pamphlet *British Workers and the US Civil War* (2012) is good on ruling-class support for the Confederacy and on the ex-left-wingers hired to try to win over Lancashire workers.

Marx and Engels' writings and correspondence on American slavery and the Civil War are mostly no longer online thanks to legal action by publishers Lawrence and Wishart. *Karl Marx on America and the Civil War*, edited by Saul Padover (1972), is a good collection, but expensive. If you want a summary, Kevin Anderson's 2010 *Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity and Non-Western Societies* includes a chapter surveying the highlights, setting them in context and explaining their significance for Marx's ideas. It also discusses how British and American workers' struggles during and after the Civil War influenced Marx's understanding of exploitation and workers' resistance as he rewrote *Capital*.

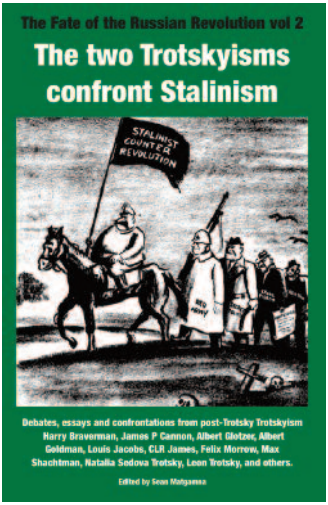
BOOKS FROM WORKERS' LIBERTY

TO BE PUBLISHED IN SEPTEMBER 2015

THE TWO TROTSKYISMS CONFRONT STALINISM

For the revolutionary socialists, the Trotskyists, it has been a very long march through the 20th century and beyond, and over sometimes uncharted, unexpected, terrain. Central to it has been the fight against Stalinism, the attempt to understand it, the battle to wipe the labour movement clean of it. This book documents the formative debates between the two main strands into which Trotskyism divided in the 1940s.

£19.99 / €30 / US$30 / AUS$45



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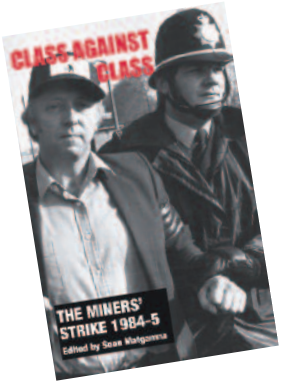

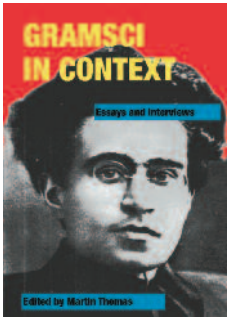

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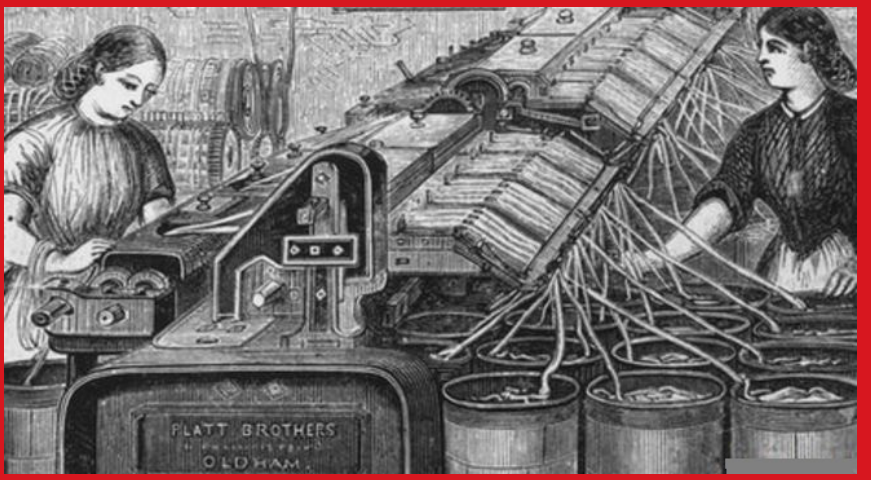
In 1865, slavery was abolished in the United States at the end of a four year Civil War. This pamphlet looks at the stand taken during the war by workers in Britain, who organised mass protests against slavery and against British ruling-class plans for military intervention in support of the slave-owners. It tells the story of how this internationalist and anti-racist struggle revived the British labour movement, gave workers the confidence to fight for the vote, and contributed to the birth of Karl Marx's International Working Men's Association, the "First International".



Workers' Liberty is a revolutionary socialist organisation active in the working-class movement, among students and young people, and in many other campaigns and struggles. We stand for a world where class exploitation and all forms of oppression are abolished, and society reorganised on the basis of freedom and equality.

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