

How the British workers' movement helped end slavery in America: Part one

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This is the first part of a two-part article on the role of the British working class in the victory of the Northern Union forces in the American Civil War and the abolition of slavery in the United States.

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 Conditions 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 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.

To be continued

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