How the British workers’ movement helped end slavery in America: Part two

By Joe Mount
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This is the second 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. The first part was posted January 5.

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 enchained 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.

An 1862 meeting held at Manchester’s Free Trade Hall 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
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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