

Distorters of the Revolutionary Heritage of the American Proletariat

THE TRADITIONS OF CIVIL WAR AND
RECONSTRUCTION

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I

INVALUABLE experiences and lessons for the working class which for the most part still remain buried in American history are still to be excavated and made an integral part of the experiences of today. The whole question of the revolutionary heritage and traditions of the working class in the United States has been tackled only in parts and only in a partly Marxist-Leninist manner. We have permitted the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois historians unchallenged not only to interpret in their way the history of their class but also to misinterpret the history of our class. In whatever conflicts carried on in this sphere we have permitted the pretenders to Marxism to enter the lists as representatives of the working class.

With us, the Party of the working class, this is far from being purely an "academic" matter. It becomes a question of life and death. For it is a part of the general task of developing on all fronts the clearly defined, independent position of the proletariat, so that it can go to battle with all its weapons in good order, so that it can present an indomitable fighting front on all sectors of the class war.

So far have the treasures of American history remained hidden treasures that the conception is prevalent that there was only one revolutionary period in American history, the struggle for independence from England, and even this period has not been submitted to analysis from the vantage point of Marxism-Leninism. The treasures of another revolutionary period, the Civil War and reconstruction—so full of invaluable lessons to the working class especially in regard to the Negro question—have been almost entirely ignored. It is either not recognized as a *revolutionary* period or its revolutionary content is so diluted that it is unrecognizable as being in

direct line of ascent toward the proletarian revolution. This second stage in the American bourgeois-democratic revolution, separated by almost a century from the first, remains for us also separated from the development of the social revolution. The task still waits for incorporating its experiences in the living body of Marxism-Leninism.

It is inevitable that the pressing nature of the Negro question today, the problems met with in clarifying the Communist position on this question, should lead us back to Civil War and reconstruction since it was there that much of the groundwork was laid for the present oppression of the Negroes. A proper analysis of this period becomes a practical need of the present day. And just as inevitably must our opponents turn to this period in an effort to find historical content for their opposition to the slogan of the right of self-determination for the Negroes as raised by the Party. In this opposition the "also-Marxist" Thomas and the "also-Leninist" Herberg have found common ground. The also-Marxist Thomas, loath to announce openly that he is not in favor of the principle of self-determination, denies the existence of the Black Belt and its historical content. The also-Leninist Herberg, unwilling to concede the revolutionary potentialities of the national liberation struggle of the Negro people, distorts history and reshuffles its contents. A subtle division of labor with but one aim: to rob the working class of an indispensable ally in the struggle against imperialism.

"From the vantage of the revolutionary proletarian viewpoint, by means of the historical dialectics of Marxism," Herberg searches for that "new perspective" of the Civil War which will lend body to the Lovestoneite perspective on the Negro question. His article, "The Civil War in New Perspective," is published appropriately enough in V. F. Calverton's magazine, *The Modern Quarterly* (1932, No. 2).

Herberg opens with an excellent quotation from Lenin:

"The best representatives of the American proletariat are those expressing the revolutionary tradition in the life of the American people. This tradition originated in the war of liberation against the English in the 18th century and in the Civil War in the 19th century . . . Where can you find an American so pedantic, so absolutely idiotic as to deny the revolutionary and progressive significance of the American Civil War of 1860-65?"

By implication, Herberg, and through him the Lovestoneites, on the strength of the "revolutionary traditions" uncovered in his article, lay claim to being the "best representatives of the American proletariat." And what are these revolutionary traditions of the American people that Herberg finds in the Civil War and which *he* claims for the proletariat? Says Herberg in grand finale:

"There were giants in those days because it was an age demanding and creating giants. The great figures that led the abolition and radical hosts in desperate battle deserve the profoundest respect of the revolutionist of today, of every man who prizes liberty and human progress. Thad Stevens, the indomitable warrior, the Great Commoner, whose badge of honor is the frantic hate that the slave-owners and their spiritual descendants have heaped upon his memory for generations; Charles Sumner, the incorruptible, the incarnate heart and conscience of the nation, holding ideals and principles far above party and place; Wendell Phillips, the fiery-tongued abolitionist, the invincible tribune of the friendless and oppressed, the living bond between yesterday and today, between the war against chattel slavery and the struggle against capitalist wage-slavery. To the revolutionists of today belongs their tradition and not to the lily white party of Hoover the slave-trader!

"We are the truer guardians—let us claim our heritage!"

This is what Herberg gleans in the way of revolutionary traditions for the "revolutionist of today" from a period rich in experiences and lessons for the proletariat and for the Negro people! His researches can only produce this panegyric to *bourgeois* revolutionists and petty-bourgeois reformers. He slurs over and re-buries the traditions that can be of use to the *proletariat* today, claiming for himself, in the name of dialectic materialism, the task of restoring to the bourgeoisie a tradition which it itself was quick to forget and only too ready to disown. Neither the bourgeoisie nor the proletariat will thank him for his gift: the former because it has long since lost the need for revolutionary traditions; the latter because it seeks its revolutionary traditions in another way and in another content. Only "Marxist-Leninists" of the stripe of the *Modern Quarterly*-ites and the Lovestoneites can make use of such traditions—to submerge the real revolutionary heritage of the proletariat.

The Civil War and reconstruction was a bourgeois revolution in the sense that all that was required of it by history and all that lay in its power to accomplish could be carried through under the leadership of the bourgeoisie and within the bounds of bourgeois democracy. History was not ambiguous in the task allotted to the bourgeoisie: its minimum demand was the overthrow of the slavocracy, the complete destruction of the economic and political power of the Southern bourbons. The further expansion of capitalism required the annihilation of this backward, reactionary slavocracy which at every turn placed obstacles in the path of Northern industry and free agriculture, acted like a drag on the young, still progressive, "rarin' to go" bourgeoisie. The economic, and therefore the political, power of the feudal lords of the South rested upon slavery. Emancipation

and bourgeois freedom for the Negroes would strike the death blow to the pre-capitalist power of the South.

Yet both the political struggle that preceded the clash of arms and the war itself were marked by the most disgraceful compromising and vacillating on the part of the bourgeoisie. The representatives of the "free" North in Congress were like a pack of old women haggling over constitutional forms, conceding one victory after another to the slave power, while the bourbon power allied with the Copperhead Democrats of the North pressed from one advantage to another, easily enough finding legal clothing taken from the wardrobe of the bourgeois-democratic constitution with which to cover its usurpations. In the typical fashion of petty-bourgeois democrats, torn between the gathering force of the industrial bourgeoisie and the insistent, self-reliant slave power, Northern statesmen continued right up to the war to cede one point after another to their opponent. With the "inevitable conflict" already inaugurated by the South at Fort Sumter, with secession declared, with the Confederacy in being, the venerable and learned Northerners continued to bury their noses in law books seeking further compromises for their revolution, ready to grant the South almost anything it asked. Lincoln and his compromisers, the petty-bourgeoisie incarnate, entered the battle field with the cry of "Save the Union," when history demanded the full throated challenge of emancipation.

Even through the first two years of the war, bourgeois democracy continued to suffer from what Marx calls "that incurable malady *parliamentary cretenuism*, a disorder which penetrates its unfortunate victims with the solemn conviction that the whole world, its history and future, are governed and determined by a majority of votes in that particular representative body which has the honor to count them among its members."* The North was preoccupied with the "constitutionality" of raising funds for the war, of raising an army, of even the war itself, when everything depended upon a quick, decisive offensive; it was occupied with negotiations with the slave-owners of the border states when the moment demanded an immediate victory in these very border states. All of which led Marx to remark in a letter to Engels (August 7, 1862), chiding him for his lack of faith in the final victory of the North caused by its vacillating policy and its early defeats:

"It seems to me that the long and short of the whole matter is that the present war [Civil War] will have to be carried on in a revolutionary manner, and that until now the Yankees have tried to

* *Revolution and Counter-Revolution*, London, p. 109.

carry it on in a constitutional manner . . . The North will finally carry on the war in earnest and employ revolutionary means and cast aside the domination of the border slaves statesmen.”*

So blinded is the bourgeois democracy in its blustering, week-kneed youth, that it does not recognize the inner springs of its own development nor the historical aims of its revolution. Thus the ruling diplomats of the North failed to see the necessity of freeing the slaves if they were to conquer the South. They stepped on the toes of history and history gave them a powerful kick in the buttocks driving them headlong to the fulfilment of the minimum requirements of the epoch. Thus Lincoln and his compromisers literally stumbled upon emancipation, although it had been laying on the path of history for even the blind to see. In the words of Marx, “The North itself converted slavery into a military force of the South, instead of turning it against the South.” While the North was probing its constitution for ways and means of carrying on the war, the slave-owners released all their man power almost immediately because production was guaranteed by slave labor. An immediate declaration of emancipation by the North at the outbreak of the war would have released a tremendous revolutionary force to play havoc with the bourbons’ rear. But in time history administered its kick in the form of continued Confederate victories in the border states which removed all doubts in Lincoln’s mind that anything was to be gained by negotiations with the border states slave-owners.

The bourgeois revolution also produced its agents, those who, while not always conscious of their rôle, held the prod of progress in their hands and pricked on those who were wavering, uncertain, afraid before the immensity of the task allotted them. Such an agent, above anyone else, was the consistent bourgeois-democrat Thaddeus Stevens, leader of the radical Republicans, outstanding representative of the industrial bourgeoisie of the Northeast whose interests were in direct conflict with those of the slave owners and which demanded as a prerequisite for its own further development the complete destruction of the bourbon power. Less consistent, because strongly influenced by petty-bourgeois reformism, were Charles Sumner, Wendell Phillips and the bourgeois abolitionists. Our “present-day revolutionist” Herberg insists on lumping these different and to some degree opposing currents within the bourgeois democracy, without any regard, as we shall see further, to the class content of the forces aligned on the side of the North.

* *Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe, Dritte Abteilung, Der Briefwechsel zwischen Marx und Engels*, Marx-Engels Verlag, Berlin, Band 3, p. 92.

Unlike the abolitionists, who at the secession of the Southern states waved their hands in fright and cried, shopkeeper-fashion: "Let the erring states depart in peace," Stevens consistently fought every compromise and organized and led the radical Republican forces toward the seizure of the reins of the revolution from the hands of the petty-bourgeoisie. The bourgeois revolution had found its leader when it needed him most, although it was reluctant to accept him, frightened by the passion, the stubbornness, the fighting partisan spirit (as if revolution can mean anything but partisanship), the logical expression of the policy demanded by the revolutionary epoch. The distinct contribution of the bourgeois abolitionists is that they recognized the necessity for emancipation. It was Stevens however, more than anyone else, who recognized the whole revolutionary content of the period for the bourgeoisie, who led the forces that brought about the political defeat of Johnson, the Copperheads and the compromisers during the year immediately following the war and inaugurated the period of Congressional Reconstruction (1866-1877) which at least at the beginning set the form for the complete reorganization of the South.

With the defeat of the South on the battlefield and the emancipation of the slaves the revolution had only completed its first cycle. The "conquered provinces" subdued by force of arms, had still to be conquered and subdued for capitalism. The tasks were clear: the slave-owners were to be deprived of their last vestige of economic and political power, all grounds for an attempt at restoration removed. This could only be done by the armed dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, *supported by the armed Negro people*, which would carry through a revolutionary change in the system of landownership, expropriating the former landowners and dividing their lands among the Negroes; which would give this fundamental change in the economic basis of Southern society political expression in the enfranchisement of the Negroes, drawing these new peasant proprietors within the orbit of bourgeois democracy. "Only now, after the phase of the Civil War," says Marx, "has the United States really entered the revolutionary phase and the European wisecracks, who believe in the omnipotence of Mr. Johnson [then still in the saddle at Washington], will soon be disillusioned."* With these words Marx not only showed a penetrating understanding of the tasks of the bourgeois revolution, but, as we shall shortly see, a point of view in regard to the class forces of the revolution quite "innocently" ignored by Herberg in his search for the "new perspective."

The Civil War and reconstruction was a bourgeois-democratic

* *Briefwechsel*, Band 3, p. 328.

revolution both in its social content and in its method of struggle. But within itself it carried all the class and, as yet incipient, national antagonisms of bourgeois society. The bourgeoisie could not enter on the course of revolution without at the same time drawing along with it the popular masses in both the North and South, thus broadening the scope of the class struggle and drawing within its orbit not only the huge body of freedmen but also the backward "poor whites" of the South. Beginning with the abolitionists, the revolutionary movement against the slave power found its mass support among the workers of the North, the free farmers of the Northwest, the free farmers and workers of the Southern border states and, with rapidly increasing significance, among the Negroes. During reconstruction the principal mass support of the revolution was the Negro people.

In relation to the traditions of the bourgeois revolution we must uncover—for the philistines have taken good care to bury—that tradition of the bourgeois revolution which bears the imprint of the *independent* action of the proletariat and the toiling masses, *as weak or as imperfect as that may be*. In relation to the bourgeois revolution as a whole it is our task to uncover the inner springs of that revolution, its historical aims and how far it has fallen short in their accomplishment, for the bourgeoisie has never stopped to contemplate seriously the conditions of its own stormy appearance on the scene of history, nor seen the perspective of its own inevitable disappearance. Approaching the second task without regard to the first, as Herberg does, leads to ignoring the seeds of the proletarian revolution buried in the soil of the bourgeois revolution. This, in turn, leads not only to a distortion of the whole period, but to blunting the revolutionary heritage of the working class and thus obscuring its own independent class position today.

To cloak his new perspective with Marxism, Herberg uses only those quotations from Marx which deal with the nature of the revolution in general or show the limitations of the bourgeoisie. But both Marx and Engels were highly concerned with the next stage, with the proletarian revolution, and it was solely from this point of view that they hailed the victory of the North. Engels, disgusted with the North's policy of compromise, wrote to Marx on November 15, 1862:

"On the one hand it is well that the bourgeois republic has so thoroughly disgraced itself in America also, so that in the future *it can never again be preached on its own merits, but only as a means and transitional form to the social revolution*, although one is peeved that a lousy oligarchy of only half the number of inhabi-

tants has proved itself just as strong as the clumsy, big, helpless democracy."* (Italics mine, J.S.A.).

"Only as a means and a transitional form to the social revolution"—that is the main import of the victory of the North, that was the reason that the revolutionary proletariat both in Europe and America supported the North. The solution of the question of slavery was necessary before the solution of the question of wage-slavery could be undertaken with any degree of success in America. Only then could the American working class enter upon the scene of history in its own capacity as a revolutionary class. Discussing the experiences of the European revolutions of 1848-51, Marx gives classic expression to the relation of the proletariat to the bourgeois revolution:

"The working class movement itself never is independent, never is of an *exclusively proletarian* character until all the different factions of the middle class, and particularly its most progressive faction, the large manufacturers, have conquered political power, and remodelled the state according to their wants. It is then that the inevitable conflict between the employer and the employed becomes imminent, and cannot be adjourned any longer; that the working class can no longer be put off with delusive hopes and promises never to be realized; that the great problem of the nineteenth century, the abolition of the proletariat, is at last brought forward fairly and in its proper light."† (Italics mine, J.S.A.).

Herberg quotes from the Address of the International Workingmen's Association to President Lincoln, which was written by Marx, congratulating the American people upon their struggles against slavocracy and upon Lincoln's re-election in the face of the powerful Democratic opposition in the North. Herberg extracts a few words in passing from this part of the Address: "If resistance to the slave power was the watchword of your election, the triumphal war-cry of your re-election is Death to Slavery." But he fails to point out, that this, as well as the whole address, was written in the name of the revolutionary proletariat precisely to recapitulate the main points at issue in the conflict and remind Lincoln, whom Marx characterized elsewhere as a "narrow formalistic lawyer,"‡ of the minimum

* *Briefwechsel*, Band 3, p. 109.

† *Revolution and Counter-Revolution*, pp. 8-9.

‡ On the eve of the re-election of Lincoln, Marx wrote to Engels (September 7, 1864), leaving no doubt as to his estimate of Lincoln's predilections as a petty-bourgeois and of the forces at work which were bound to have their way: "Since the beginning of the war this [the elections of 1864] is undoubtedly the most critical point. If this is shifted, then old Lincoln can blunder on to his heart's content . . . If Lincoln comes through—which is

tasks demanded of him by the revolution. This whole letter has the nature of a prod from the proletariat. And to leave no doubt as to the basis upon which the working class of Europe and the North supported the revolution, Marx says:

"The workingmen of Europe felt sure that as the American War of Independence initiated a new era of ascendancy for the middle class, so the American Anti-Slavery War will do for the working classes.*

That this was too much for the petty-bourgeois Lincoln is shown in the reply which was written for Lincoln by Charles Francis Adams, the United States Minister in London, the kernel of which is:

"The government of the United States of America has a clear consciousness that its policy neither is, nor could be, reactionary; but at the same time it adheres to the course which it adopted at the beginning of abstaining everywhere from propagandism and unlawful intervention. It strives to do equal justice to all states and to all men, and it relies upon the beneficial results of that effort for support at home, and for respect and good will throughout the world."*

Thus the bourgeoisie served notice on the proletariat that while it was quite willing to accept its support, it would resist any attempt of the proletariat to enter the struggle on its own account.

A whole period of industrial development in the North had intervened between the war of 1812 with England and the Civil War. The very growth of the plantation system in the South which had so rapidly built the power of the slave-owners, supplied the cheap cotton necessary for the textile industry both in England and in New England. The textile industry was the first to develop on a large scale in the North; it was in its center, New England, where the power of the industrial bourgeoisie first developed. It was here also that the abolition movement arose and gained momentum with the increasing industrialization of the Northeast. It is important to note—what Herberg forgets—that since 1830 there had been a sizeable organized labor movement in the North which had come to

certain—it will be on a completely radical platform and under entirely changed circumstances. The old man will then, in accordance with his juridical manner, find radical methods compatible with his conscience. (*Briefwechsel*, Band 3, p. 192).

* The address is published in full in Herman Schleuter, *Lincoln, Labor and Slavery*, pp. 189-190.

• *Ibid.*, p. 192.

blows with the bourgeoisie on its own account long before the outbreak of the Civil War. And what is of special significance in the problem under discussion, this labor movement had advanced its own independent position as distinct from that of the bourgeois abolitionists in regard to the slavery question. Although the working class could not because of its youth and inexperience grasp the full implications of the struggle against slavery yet class-consciousness was strong enough for it to realize that the existence of slavery was a direct threat to and competitor of free labor. So preoccupied is Herberg with claiming the bourgeois abolitionist tradition for the proletariat that he fails to even notice that one month after William Lloyd Garrison's *Liberator* first appeared in Boston on January 1, 1831, a workers' convention met in Boston under the name "New England Association of Farmers, Mechanics and other Workingmen." *The purpose of this convention was to organize an independent political labor party.* In the very first issue of the *Liberator* Garrison, leader of the abolitionists, opposed the agitation for the formation of a working class party and decried the "attempt . . . to inflame the minds of our working classes against the more opulent, and to persuade men that they are condemned and oppressed by a wealthy aristocracy."

From the very beginning of the abolition movement a class line was evident, with the organized workers taking the position that wage-slavery as well as chattel slavery must be done away with.

"The abolitionists denied the very existence of 'white slavery,'" says Herman Schleuter, in his book *Lincoln, Labor and Slavery*. "They opposed the spokesmen of the workingmen who in their speeches and articles used the term 'white slavery', and flatly denied that wage workers were slaves. The abolitionists, indeed, evinced so little understanding of the rising movement of the workingmen that they denied them the right of independent organization, of making separate demands as a class, and of securing their special interests." (pp. 39-40).

It was not in bourgeois circles but principally among the unorganized workers of the Northeast that the bourgeois abolitionists found their mass support. For the unorganized and semi-proletarians, still lacking class-consciousness; were not yet aware of the immediacy to them of wage-slavery. Speaking of the early abolition movement, a writer of New England says:

"The anti-slavery movement was not strongest in the more educated classes, but was predominantly a people's movement, based on the simplest human instincts and far stronger for a time in the factories and shoe shops than in the pulpits or colleges."*

* Thomas W. Higginson, *Cheerful Yesterdays*, pp. 115-117, cited by Schleuter.

With the resurgence of the labor movement in the 1840's the same conflict arose between the bourgeois and working class abolitionists and persisted in varying degree down to the Civil War. For the worker-abolitionists the rallying cry, in the words of William West, a Boston worker, was: "Down with all slavery, both chattel and wages." A convention of New England workers held at Lynn, Mass., in 1846, when the war was impending with Mexico over the possession of Texas—a war for the direct benefit of the slave-owners for whom continual expansion was a matter of life or death—took sides unhesitatingly against the war and slavery. The action of these workers lies in the direct line of the revolutionary tradition which Herberg overlooks and which the proletariat will not.

"Whereas—reads the resolution passed by this convention—there are at present three million of our brethren and sisters groaning in chains on the Southern plantations; and, whereas, we wish not only to be consistent, but to secure to all others those rights and privileges for which we are contending ourselves; therefore . . .

"Resolved . . . we will not take up arms to sustain the Southern slaveholders in robbing one-fifth of our countrymen of their labor.

"Resolved, that we recommend our brethren to speak out in thunder tones, both as associations and as individuals, and to let it no longer be said that Northern laborers, while they are contending for their rights, are a standing army to keep three millions of their brethren and sisters in bondage at the point of the bayonet."*

No revolutionary working class meeting today would hesitate to pass this resolution, with changes required by a new epoch and new conditions of oppression of the Negro people.

The Socialist and Communist doctrines current among the workers of Europe at the time were reflected in America and found expression on the slavery question. Frederick Douglass, a leading Negro abolitionist, complained that the efforts of the "Communists" to broaden the struggle would make "anti-slavery still more unpopular by identifying it with Communism (a complaint perhaps justified at the time—in the 1840's—in view of the fact that a number of the "Communists," did not recognize the immediacy of the struggle against slavery and would "postpone" that struggle until wage-slavery had been abolished; nevertheless, herein lies the germ of present-day Negro reformism which carries the same argument over into the period of imperialism and proletarian revolution). In his memoirs, Douglass tells of how John A. Collins who "had recently returned from England full of Communistic ideas, which ideas would do away with individual property," spoke at an anti-slavery conven-

* George E. McNeil, *The Labor Movement*, p. 107.

tion in Syracuse, N. Y., in 1843, and "proposed to adjourn our anti-slavery discussion and take up the subject of Communism." "To this," says Douglass, "I ventured to object."* This incident throws a penetrating light upon the still immature, but clear, conflict in class positions.

Nor must we forget the part played by a large number of the German immigrant workers who were pioneers of Marxism in this country. Organizations like the *Arbeiterbund*, led by Joseph Weydemeyer who was a close friend of Karl Marx, took an unequivocal position against slavery, as the same time keeping uppermost the class aims of the workers which, they realized, were for the moment bound up with the successful realization of the bourgeois revolution.

When the conflict was transferred from the arena of politics to the battlefield the organized workers were the ones who became practical abolitionists, with weapons in hand.

At the outbreak and during the first year of the war the organized labor movement was extremely weak and almost non-existent due to its inability to recover entirely from the onslaught of the crisis of 1857 and to the general collapse of industry which reflected the state of apoplexy of the Northern bourgeoisie when faced with the "inevitable conflict." The working class, despite the relative lateness of the second stage in the bourgeois revolution, was still too weak in numbers, not yet located strategically enough in capitalist economy, and too immature politically to have left the imprint of its own class position clearly and unequivocally on the course of events. In general, it followed in the wake of the bourgeoisie and supported it in the struggle against the slave power, without at the same time, however, entering the struggle as a class on its own account or with as much consciousness of its own aims as had been the case in the bourgeois revolutions in Europe in the 19th century. But, on the other hand, it must be remembered that while the urban petty-bourgeoisie during the European revolutions of 1848-51, although vacillating during the most critical periods as is its nature, still was a source of mass support to the revolution, the Northern urban petty-bourgeoisie was the main ally in the North of the Bourbon power both in the political struggle preceding the war and during the war itself. Thus the bourgeoisie found its main support in the revolutionary struggle in the working class, the pioneer farmers of the Northwest and the Negro people.

But this is no reason for overlooking the rôle played by the working class in summing up the revolutionary traditions of the period. On the contrary, it becomes more imperative for a present-day revolu-

* *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, written by himself, p. 231.

tionist to sift out of this temporary alliance of the classes the specific part played by the proletariat and bring to light both the force imparted by it to the revolution and the class conflicts which were bound to and did arise during the bourgeois revolution. To fail to do so would be to submerge completely the identity of the proletariat as a class, even though that identity may have been momentarily blurred—only blurred, not destroyed—by the demands of history.

Among certain backward sections of the workers (principally in such trading and banking centers as New York and Boston where the influence of the slavocracy and its petty-bourgeois allies was strong) the war was not received with great enthusiasm. If one recalls the vacillations of the bourgeoisie itself, its hesitancy in the face of its own revolution from which it had everything to gain, its inadequacy in finding means with which to carry on the war, its stammering utterance of only a half revolutionary slogan ("Save the Union")—then the quick response of the organized workers appears in its full historic importance. Especially so since these workers were aware of what seemed to them the more immediate struggle against wage-slavery and were *not* generally aware of the primacy of the struggle against chattel slavery. At the first call for men—while the petty-bourgeoisie remained trembling in its parlor—whole unions enlisted in a body. Both the subordination of the working class to the needs of the bourgeois revolution and the decisiveness with which it rose to the historic task are expressed in this cryptic sentence in the minutes of a Philadelphia trade union:

"It having been resolved to enlist with Uncle Sam for the war, this union stands adjourned until either the Union is safe or we are whipped."*

The bourgeois revolution itself gave birth to revolutionary energy among the masses in proportion to the decisiveness of the struggle and the consciousness of its aims. The value to the working class of democrats like Stevens, Wendell Phillips and some of the abolitionist leaders was precisely that they educated the masses in the tasks of the bourgeois revolution, drew wider masses of them into conscious political activity and thus helped to release the energy of the masses that was to be utilized very shortly in battles between the erstwhile allies.

The war itself sharpened the class struggle within the bourgeois democracy and created the forces for the violent disruption of the union of the classes. The fortunes made from war contracts, the consolidation of industry and its growth to meet the needs of war,

* T. V. Powderly, *Thirty Years of Labor*, p. 57.

the concentration of wealth, strengthened the power of the bourgeoisie. As a result of this process of economic entrenchment during the war, the industrial bourgeoisie was able finally to wrest control of the federal government from the philistines enthroned in Washington and to buttress its economic ascendancy by the utilization of the state power for its own class needs in time to dictate the terms of submission to the South. But in the same proportion, the labor movement gathered strength and in the revolutionary milieu was able quickly to reorganize its old trade unions, build new ones and even during the war enter into direct conflict with the bourgeoisie. Toward the closing days of the war the working class had a bitter foretaste of bourgeois reaction when federal troops were used against strikers in New York. But the working class was steeling itself for the great battles of 1875-1894 which in their mass character and militancy approached insurrection.

It was the recognition of these class forces and of their direction which caused Marx to write Engels (September 10, 1862): "It is quite possible that things may come to a kind of revolution in the North beforehand."* Marx is purposely vague in his choice of words. He says "kind of revolution" because he realized full well the weakness and immaturity of the American working class. But that he did not underestimate the *pushing* character of working class participation in the bourgeois revolution (which the "Marxist" Herberg ignores) is shown by his remark to Engels (August 7, 1862) that "if Lincoln does not give in [to the demand for an energetic prosecution of the war] (which he will do, however), there will be a revolution."*

Nor, in gathering in the revolutionary traditions of the proletariat from this period, can we overlook the heroic and unprecedented action of the working class in England in preventing the British ruling class from declaring war against the North. Textile workers in Manchester, starving because the mills had been shut down by a lack of cotton caused by the war across the Atlantic, as well as workers in London, demonstrated in thousands in solidarity with the North. Karl Marx, at that time in London, played an important part in organizing the protest against the threatened war, and his articles appearing in the European press contributed towards mobilizing sympathy for the North. "It was not the wisdom of the ruling classes," says the Inaugural Address of the International Workingmen's Association, "but the heroic resistance to their criminal folly by the working classes of England that saved the West of Europe

* *Briefwechsel*, Band 3, p. 102.

* *Ibid.*, p. 92.

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

The bond thus created with the North was shifted exclusively to the American working class when war threatened again with England in 1869. In an address to William Sylvis, one of the militant labor leaders of the time and president of the National Labor Union which had just been organized, the International called upon the working class in the United States to oppose the war plans of its ruling class. In this message of international working class solidarity the first proletarian International clearly defines the relationship of class forces resulting from the Civil War:

“ . . . The successful close of the war against slavery has indeed inaugurated a new era in the annals of the working class. In the United States itself an independent labor movement has since arisen which the old parties and the professional politicians view with distrust . . .

“ . . . The Civil War offered a compensation in the liberation of the slaves and *the impulse which it thereby gave to your own class movement.*” . . . (Italics mine, J.S.A.).

After this clear summation of the import of the Civil War to the working class, the Address, with the same clarity and precision, lays bare the perspective:

“ . . . *Yours, then is the glorious task of seeing to it that at last the working class shall enter upon the scene of history, no longer as a servile following, but as an independent power, as a power imbued with a sense of its responsibility and capable of commanding peace where their would-be masters cry war.*” (Italics mine, J.S.A).*

That the working class availed itself of the revolutionary energy released by the bourgeois-democratic revolution for its own class interests is shown in the tremendous upsurge of the labor movement toward the end of the war and in the period immediately following. One of its best representatives, Sylvis, in his reply to the Address of the International, showed that while the war had left him with some traces of illusion about bourgeois democracy, he was by no means oblivious to the perspective opened before the working class:

“Our recent war,” he wrote, “has led to the foundation of the most infamous money aristocracy of the earth. This money power saps the very life of the people. We have declared war against it

* Schleuter, *op. cit.*, pp. 231-232.

and we are determined to conquer—by means of the ballot, if possible—if not, we shall resort to more serious means. A little blood-letting is necessary in desperate cases.”*

To him we must give credit for one of the first expressions of the principle of solidarity for Negro and white workers on the threshold of an epoch which gives that solidarity its content. In a speech delivered in 1868—1868!—before a meeting of white workers at Sunbury, Pa., he said:

“No man in America rejoiced more than I at the downfall of Negro slavery. But when the shackles fell from the limbs of those four millions of blacks, it did not make them *free* men; it simply transferred them from one condition of slavery to another; it placed them upon the platform of the white workingman, and made all slaves together.”*

This much—only an indication—for the rôle of the working class in the Civil War. But thus far we have treated only of one of the source springs of the revolutionary traditions of the proletariat inherent in this epoch. The most important revolutionary experience of reconstruction—the significant revolutionary rôle played by the Negro people—is *entirely* overlooked by “the present-day revolutionist” Herberg, who thus follows in the wake of the bourgeois slanderers of the Negro people. This is the subject of the next article.

* *Ibid.*, p. 234.

* *Life, Speeches, Labors and Essays of Wm. H. Sylvius*, p. 232.