Historical Materialism
and the Fight Against Racism

Harriet Tubman (left) and a group of slaves she led to freedom

THE STRUGGLE
TO END SLAVERY
IN THE UNITED STATES

Racism is the cornerstone of the international capitalist system in all parts of the world today. Revolutionaries must win the struggle against racism in order to smash capitalism. But how? Racism is on the rise everywhere, from Israel to South Africa, from the USA to the USSR, from Brazil to Canada. Many of the gains won in
past anti-racist struggles have been lost. At the same time, new movements and organizations against racism are surging forth, from England to Ecuador. How can these new forces accomplish their aims in the face of the rising tide of reaction?

We have much to learn from history. A good example of a successful fight against racism and reaction is the story of the Abolitionists in the United States in the middle third of the nineteenth century. They set out to “abolish” the North American system of racial slavery, one of the most viciously oppressive social systems in modern history, and they succeeded in destroying it. They did so without an explicitly revolutionary ideology to guide them; indeed, their movement started twenty years before Marx and Engels even wrote the Communist Manifesto, when the proletarian movement was in its infancy. Because of this, the Abolitionists could not succeed in eradicating racism itself. But they saved hundreds of thousands from the horrors of chattel slavery, and they established a powerful tradition of anti-racism in U.S. history, which continues down to the present. The history of the development of their movement teaches us much about how to conduct a struggle against racism—and win!

INTRODUCTION: HISTORICAL MATERIALISM

Our method for studying the experience of the Abolitionists is historical materialism. Marx developed this method of analysis, which goes beyond the “great ideas of great men” garbage that is usually taught in school. Instead, historical materialism takes as its starting point the activities and struggles of the millions and millions of men and women whose conscious actions combined to make things happen the way they did. It examines the ways in which economic and political (ideological) forces interact to produce historical change.

We are taught to see society (and even nature) as basically unchanged. Most of us live as though today were pretty much the same as yesterday, and tomorrow will be today all over again. Social institutions like nations, governments, workplaces, and schools seem to be like mountain ranges or stars: permanent features of the world, changing very, very slowly—if at all. But even stars are born and die. Even mountains can be thrust up by the clash of gigantic plates that make up the earth’s crust, and they can be sheared off by glacial flow. Everything
changes. Things change even when they don't seem to be changing at all. Beneath the appearance of stability, contradictions are developing. The forces of change are at work.

"The history of all hitherto existing society," wrote Marx and Engels in the Communist Manifesto in 1848, "is the history of class struggle." People fight back against oppression, and their struggle changes the world. Periods of seeming passivity among the oppressed, however prolonged, are replaced by blazing struggle. Passivity is relative, activity is absolute. Systems of class exploitation, although they seem at times permanent and even "natural," end. But class hatred by itself is not enough. Utopian visions of an "ideal society" are not enough. After all, the oppressed have dreamed and fought for equality for thousands of years. We must also understand the historical laws of development of society.

Let's look at two familiar slogans: "what you do counts," and "history is on our side." The first of these is one of the main things to keep in mind today! We will see from the story of the Abolitionists that the lives of millions were changed by the work of a relatively small group of dedicated activists. But if we take this slogan in isolation, it may suggest to us that people can make history just as they please. We may think that anything is possible, develop a short-sighted and pragmatic style of work, and then become frustrated when we don't see things change as fast as we would like.

The second slogan reminds us that patience and persistence pay off in the long run. It suggests that there are scientific laws describing general aspects of social development. These laws show that chattel slavery "had to" end in the U.S. south, and that capitalism likewise contains within itself the seeds of its own destruction. But there is a common and dangerous distortion of this slogan. Many have taken it to mean that historical laws operate independently of human activity. In this one-sided, mechanical view, only the actual is (or was) possible, and everything that happens (or happened, or will happen) is necessary. People who believe this are likely to be passive and to take an excessively "long view" of the struggle. Through the story of the Abolitionists we will try to show how these two slogans—"what you do counts" and "history is on our side"—represent opposite aspects of one important truth: social laws do determine historical outcomes, but they do so precisely through the struggles of real human beings who make
conscious decisions-based on their ideology-about what to do. Chattel slavery in the U.S. south had to end, but how it ended and when it ended made a huge difference in the human cost and the outcome of the process. What the Abolitionists did, counted.

**THE SLAVE SYSTEM AND CAPITALISM IN THE U.S.**

Slavery in the United States was one of the most grotesque and vicious forms of exploitation devised in the terrible history of capitalism. It was also one of the most profitable. Indeed, the African slave trade provided much of the capital that made possible the "industrial revolution" in England and elsewhere in Europe, as well as in the northern United States. Because of this, it took a long and bitter struggle-including a four-year civil war-to end it. The struggle against the racist slave system in the U.S. is a good example of how things change.

**KING COTTON: FOUNDATION OF US ECONOMY**

The U.S. economy in the first quarter of the nineteenth century was largely agricultural. Most people in the North still lived and worked on small farms, and the Southern economy and politics were dominated by large plantation owners. In terms of politics, bourgeois political parties were beginning to develop. There was little left of the popular fervor that had characterized the era of the American Revolution of 1776 (at least among the free population) just a few decades earlier. Industrialization had not yet occurred on a large scale, and most workers labored in very small shops. There was little in the way of a developed working class, although some skilled workers (for example, Philadelphia carpenters) had begun to organize and certain industries (like textiles in Massachusetts) were beginning to flourish. From all external appearances, the time did not seem ripe for rapid social change. But the appearance of stability belied a critical set of internal contradictions which would eventually lead to the great armed struggle that destroyed the slave system.

The U.S. economy of the early nineteenth century was built literally on the backs of slaves. Cotton became an important crop in the South with the development of the gin around 1800, and was soon the dominant export of the entire country. Southern agricultural goods combined to account for more than sixty percent of all American exports.
Slave labor in the U.S. was thus used to produce commodities for the sake of expanding the capital of the plantation owners. It was a form of capitalism. By the 1830s, millions of pounds of cotton were shipped every year to factories in Great Britain, where textiles were manufactured for world markets. One Southerner bragged that “the slaveholding South is now the controlling power of the world ... no power on Earth dares make war on cotton.”

Such exaggerated boasts reflected the Southern plantation capitalists’ inflated sense of power, and the fantastic profits they reaped. But the cotton trade also profited the key ship-building industry and the merchant capitalists in the North, whose ships transported cotton across the Atlantic and returned with British manufactured goods. The profits earned from the slave-cotton system provided the capital for early development in the United States, including the formation and growth of the banking system. As a consequence, few capitalists opposed it. As a New York businessman told an Abolitionist in 1835, “We cannot afford, sir, to let you and your associates endeavor to overthrow slavery. It is not a matter of principle with us. It is a matter of business necessity.” In fact, the most powerful members of the emerging capitalist class in the North were still, in the 1830s, strong supporters of the status quo in the South. This, too, would change.

**SLAVES FOUGHT CLASS OPPRESSION**

This “status quo” was a life of misery and unrelenting oppression for the slaves. This inevitably created a struggle between slave owners and slaves that, in the long run, doomed the slave system. Even though slavery was not ended in the United States as a direct result of large-scale slave insurrection, we need to understand how the actions of the slaves themselves—based on their own understanding of their situation—created the basis for the Abolitionist movement.

The most dramatic—and least frequent—form of struggle was armed slave rebellion against the oppressors. As W. E. B. DuBois eloquently described it,

> The flaming fury of their mad attempts at vengeance echoes all down the blood-swept path of slavery. In Jamaica they upturned the government and harried the land until England crept and sued for peace. In the Danish Isles they started a whirlwind of slaughter; in Haiti they drove their masters into the sea; and in South Carolina they rose twice like a threatening wave against the terror-stricken whites, but were betrayed. Such outbreaks here and
there," DuBois continued, "foretold the possibility of coordinate action and organic development."

The incomplete historical records that have come down to us reveal no fewer than 250 conspiracies and revolts of more than ten slaves in the United States itself: an average of one per year, not counting smaller actions. These isolated rebellions displayed the slaves' heroism and determination under the most oppressive conditions, but they could never have brought down the whole slave system, with its nerve center in Washington, D.C. Nonetheless, the specter of Haiti would haunt the U.S. South until the abolition of slavery finally laid it to rest.

Like any other exploited laborers, slaves found ways to resist their masters on a daily basis, individually and in small groups. They worked as slowly and carelessly as they dared, and sabotaged what they could. They burned barns and smokehouses, helping themselves to food produced by their own labor and stolen by the masters from their tables. Such spontaneous economic struggles could no more overthrow the slave system than industrial strikes can overthrow capitalism. But slaves could not be tired, and even the most brutal tortures devised by the plantation capitalists to terrorize them could not subdue them entirely.

These social relations of production limited the development of the Southern economy, even at its height, and virtually guaranteed that it would eventually be overwhelmed by the industrial capitalism emerging in the North. But "eventually" would be far too late for the long-suffering slaves. More significant was the political "backlash" of slavery: its dreadful brutality not only bred resistance from the slaves themselves, but also began to provoke a response from northern whites and even from a few daughters and sons of the planters themselves, who would desert their class to take the side of the slaves. The slave system was producing its own grave-diggers.

The chief form of resistance by slaves was "stealing themselves," or running away. In the early years of slavery, groups of Africans took to the woods and swamps of the vast Southland. Later runaways joined native Americans in Florida to form the Seminole tribe, and fought off the army of the United States for years. After the War of 1812, with increased commerce between the northern and southern states, fugitive slaves more often headed north. As DuBois put it, these men [sic] saved slavery and killed it. They saved it by leaving it to a false seductive dream of peace and the eternal subjugation of the
laboring class. They destroyed it by presenting themselves before the eyes of the North and the world as living specimens of the real meaning of slavery. They [destroyed] it too by joining the free Negroes of the North, and with them organizing themselves into a great black phalanx that worked and schemed and paid and finally fought for the freedom of black men in America.

By 1831, the trickle was becoming a flood. The fugitives were getting more and more assistance from whites as well as growing numbers of free blacks in the north. As we will see later, the Abolitionists would engage directly in the struggle by assisting these run-aways in a large-scale, organized fashion. The firing up of this “Underground Railroad” would take the struggle against slavery to a new level.

BEGINNINGS OF THE ABOLITIONIST MOVEMENT

A clear and effective anti-slavery, anti-racist understanding did not develop right away, at least not among the white population. It took years of hard and often dangerous work for anti-slavery activists to comprehend just what they were up against, and what it would take to eliminate it. And it took a profound ideological struggle.

In the early years of the nineteenth century, there was little open anti-slavery agitation. Some white people in the North opposed slavery on religious grounds, usually advocating some means of “gradual” emancipation. That often meant freeing slave children when they reached age 21, so that the “investments” of slaveowners were protected! A small movement of conservative merchant capitalists and politicians succeeded by the 1820’s in getting slavery ended in most Northern states. It had never been an important economic institution there anyway: neither the small farms with long winter seasons, nor manufacturing enterprises contending with the ups and downs of business cycles, could make profitable use of slave labor. In both the North and the South, many supporters of gradual emancipation (including Abraham Lincoln) backed “colonization,” an organized effort to send American blacks to Africa. They were motivated mainly by racist ideology, wanting to live in a “white” society. Most black people opposed this bitterly. A meeting of 3000 in Philadelphia condemned colonization in 1817 as “an outrage, having no other object in view than the benefit of the slaveholding interests of the country.” The “gradualist” anti-slavery movement in 1830, then, was dominated by
wealthy white merchants, ignored the misery of blacks, and was often openly racist.

In 1329 a courageous black man named David Walker had published a call for blacks to throw off the yoke of slavery, by whatever means necessary. Walker’s Appeal was quickly suppressed in the South, and condemned by the “gradualist” movement in the North. Only a few free black communities in the North heed ed his appeal, and there was little outcry when Walker was found dead in front of his Boston shop immediately afterward. There was little indication of impending radical change in the Southern slave system.

But by ending slavery in the Northern states the gradualists created the conditions for sizable free black urban communities there. These free black people—many of them workers—would provide critical support and leadership in the struggles against slavery and racism in the years ahead. And some anti-slavery whites became frustrated with the inaction and ineffectiveness of the gradualist movement, especially regarding emancipation in the South. They learned that a more militant and confrontational approach to anti-slavery was needed. By 1831, these black and white activists had formed the Abolitionist movement, a coordinated effort for the immediate end of slavery and against racism in both the North and the South.

Free black people in the North had been organizing meetings and publishing anti-slavery papers for years. By 1830 they had organized fifty anti-slavery groups based in cities and towns across the North. They would remain the most important base of support—both financial and moral—for the movement. But—perhaps unlike Haiti, where black people formed an overwhelming majority of the population—they could not destroy slavery in the U.S. by themselves. Beginning in the 1830s, significant numbers of whites began to join them. This multi-racial unity was essential, even though white Abolitionists were themselves affected by racism and often hesitated to allow black Abolitionists to take positions of leadership within the movement.

Most white Abolitionists were still pacifists in the 1830s, opposing slavery on religious grounds and relying on tactics of moral persuasion. It is to their credit that they interpreted Christianity to demand freedom for the slaves. After all, the southern churches defended slavery on Christian principles, while the Catholic Church incited red among immigrant workers
in the north, and even Quaker meeting-houses usually seated black guests separately in the back of the room. But religious ideology held the Abolitionists movement back. Many white Abolitionist leaders condemned slavery as a sin, but so was any form of coercion (including anti-slavery violence) a sin to them. Often they seemed more concerned with their own spiritual purity than with the suffering of the slaves. They believed in the rule of “God”, not in creating a more just or egalitarian human government. Some of these ideas would weaken or change as the struggle against slavery escalated in the 1850s. But even the deeply religious John Brown, whose commitment to violent struggle against slavery relied more on the Old Testament doctrine of “an eye for an eye” than on the New Testament’s “turn the other cheek,” would have been a more effective and far-sighted leader if he had gotten his nose out of his Bible more often.

The Abolitionists had a wider appeal than many contemporaries—or the Abolitionists themselves—may have realized. They appealed to the basic hatred of slavery, exploitation, and discrimination felt by many workers and farmers, and even by many intellectuals, religious leaders, and small time entre-

preneurs. This partly reflected a basic contradiction between the slave system in the South and Northern wage-labor capitalism. Capitalists needed to be legally free of responsibility for their workers, so they could be laid off when the capitalists wanted. Consequently, they promoted an ideology of “freedom,” which most ordinary people interpreted as political and economic independence. Many linked this “freedom” to the ideals of the American Revolution of 1776, particularly the notions of republican equality and fair play. Workers in particular also opposed exploitation, and hated slavery for its vicious treatment of black workers (even though many of these white workers were infected with racist ideas as well). They saw the existence of slave labor as a threat to their livelihood. Many workers came to understand that they had nothing to benefit—and a great deal to lose—from the development of the slave system.

Unlike the gradualists, Abolitionists refused to worry about the capital investment which slaves represented. They demanded an immediate and total end to slavery, regardless of the cost to slaveowners or other capitalists. This was a significant step forward in the political line of the anti-slavery movement, and one which had a big impact.
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It represented a willingness to break from the capitalist leadership that had dominated the gradualist movement. For the first time in U.S. history a serious movement opposed slavery as a vile crime against humanity, not just the inconsistency with republican principles that had irked the gradualists. "You are guilty of a great wrong against God and humanity," Abolitionist leader John Brown would declare to the slaveowning Virginia aristocrats who captured him in 1859, "The cry of distress of the oppressed is my reason, and the only thing that prompted me."

Another critical development was the Abolitionists' decision to take their cause to the public in a mass way. In 1831 William Lloyd Garrison started publishing The Liberator, the most prominent newspaper of the anti-slavery movement. Within a few years Theodore Dwight Weld, Angelina Grimke, and others were organizing a massive petition drive to inform people (mainly Northern whites) of the evils of slavery. This drive fanned out across the countryside, organized in hundreds of local communities, often through the churches. It was conducted by thousands of rank and file activists, the vast majority of them women who were excluded from formal electoral politics. Petitioners circulated a pamphlet, written by Weld, which described the horrors of slavery in graphic detail and revealed the power wielded by Southern capitalists over the national government. This gave many Northerners a clearer picture of the enemy, often described as the "Slave Power." Within several years more than half a million signatures had been collected on petitions, mostly from northern states, and sent to Congress. While these petitions had little effect on Washington politicians, they provided a vehicle for millions of
people to discuss the issues of slavery and racism and their immediate abolition.

By the end of the 1830s the Abolitionists had established a mass base for the idea of immediate emancipation in communities across the North. They were outlawed and persecuted by state and local authorities in the South. They were no longer taken lightly anywhere. And when Congress refused in 1836 even to accept anti-slavery petitions for consideration—the so-called “gag rule”—many Abolitionists began to lose confidence in the efficacy of moral pressure. The movement would turn to more concrete methods of struggle, electoral and confrontational.

It took time for the Abolitionist movement to get started. And it was not easy. Many whites regarded the first Abolitionist meetings and anti-slavery newspapers as little more than the work of a radical fringe. Contradictions such as racism among white Abolitionists and conflicting class interests among wage-workers, capitalists and petit-bourgeois elements in the movement threatened to divide Abolitionism even as the broad base of the movement seemed to be its greatest strength. Few channels of mass communication were open to Abolitionists. By 1836, slave owners and other rac-ists across the country recognized the threat which abolitionism posed, and actively organized against it. Abolitionist leaders like Garrison and Weld were threatened and violently attacked, meetings were broken up, and local supporters were harassed. The white Abolitionist Elijah Lovejoy was murdered in Illinois, and lecture halls burned and sacked in Boston and Philadelphia. But the Abolitionists persisted, for they understood the importance of every speech, every meeting, every conversation over a petition, every newspaper and pamphlet they could distribute. Without the determination of these individuals at this critical stage of the movement, the hell of slavery would have lasted considerably longer in the United States.

**ABOLITIONISTS’ POLITICAL LINE ADVANCES THROUGH STRUGGLE**

Abolitionism did not stand still. The Abolitionist critique of slavery and racism grew more radical and comprehensive as the movement gained experience in fighting the slaveowners and their agents, and debating the key issues of the day. The political development of the movement was primary in ending the slave
system through the Civil War, and dealing a major blow to racism in the process. Most important, Abolitionists came to understand that they could not obey the rules of law established by the government if they were going to defeat slavery. They learned that a violent struggle would be necessary.

**NAT TURNER: THE CHALLENGE OF SLAVE REBELLION**

The bloody slave rebellion led by Nat Turner in Southampton County, Virginia in 1831 terrorized the planter class and posed a sharp challenge to the infant Abolitionist movement. Many white Abolitionist leaders were ministers or other religious figures who were often outright pacifists. Some regretted Turner's bold attempt, and others condemned it openly. But many black and some white Abolitionists hailed Turner as a hero, drawing inspiration from his example. On hearing news of the uprising, old Squire Hudson of Ohio rejoiced, "Thank God for that! I am glad of it! Thank God they have risen at last!"

And as panicky slaveowners began enacting ever more repressive measures to control the slaves, yet others joined the movement. The ideological struggle between pacifism and revolutionary violence would intensify in years ahead. Black Abolitionists more often had the most advanced understanding of the need for violence, but even most white Abolitionists eventually came to accept it as a legitimate and important form of resistance to the vile institution of slavery. Even the pacifists among them, after all, accepted the American revolution against England as a moral necessity. How could slave rebellions be viewed as any different? "A baptism of blood awaits the slaveholder and his abettors," wrote one Abolitionist in the 1850's, "So be it. The Retribution is just." It would be a short step from advocating slave revolts to supporting armed violence against slavery by both blacks and whites.

**WORKERS AND SLAVES: STRUGGLE AGAINST RACISM**

The increasingly rapid emergence of the working class posed another challenge to Abolitionism. The economic panic of 1837 was followed by a depression that brought into sharp focus some disturbing effects of capitalist development: declining working conditions, periodic crises, the rise of factory labor, and widening inequality. Be-
ginning in the 1840s, factory workers—such as the young women of the Lowell textile mills—began to replace skilled tradesmen in the forefront of the labor movement. Demand grew for the ten-hour day. In New York, Philadelphia and other places newly organized workingmen’s parties protested economic conditions and promoted egalitarianism—at least for white workers.

The Lowell factory “girls” organized an active Female Anti-Slavery Society in 1832, but a sharp struggle against racism was needed to win the labor movement to support the cause of abolition. Some white workers fell for the lie-promoted heavily in the bosses’ press and by the Catholic church—that emancipated slaves would threaten their already precarious livelihood. Others, especially immigrants, feared that anti-slavery agitation would split the Democratic Party and bring to power the Whigs, an openly anti-immigrant party led by the northern bosses. Some followed land-reformers and other opportunists, arguing that their Utopian schemes for ending wage slavery would automatically solve the problem of chattel slavery. Most northern white workers, often laboring twelve to fourteen hours a day, six or seven days a week, probably gave little thought to the slaves.

Abolitionists appealed to these workers with two basic arguments. First, of course, was the “moral” one. Labor parties in New York state in the 1830s, for example, called for the abolition of slavery as “the darkest, foulest blot upon the nation’s character.” Many white workers were sympathetic to the cause of anti-slavery, and eventually became avid supporters of it. “Will you ever return to his master the slave who once sets foot on the soil of Massachusetts?” the Abolitionist Wendell Phillips asked a mass meeting of thousands of Irish workers in Boston in 1841. “No, no, no!” they shouted in reply.

The second argument went beyond this in appealing to the interests of the white workers themselves in abolishing slavery. Slavery was a degradation of labor, Weld and other Abolitionists argued, and wherever it existed free labor was defiled. They could point to factories in the South, where wage laborers were already being displaced by slaves. Thus, they maintained, racism undermined the power of the working class. Delegates to the New England Workingmen’s Association in 1846 resolved that “American slavery must be uprooted before the elevation sought by the laboring classes
can be effected.” This was an argument with powerful appeal, and one that Karl Marx would later repeat in Capital. “I wish to make a new issue out of the slave question,” an anti-slavery leader wrote in 1856, “giving importance to the mischief inflicted on the poor whites as well as blacks. [This] proves that the contest ought not to be considered a sectional one but rather a war of a class—the slaveholders against the laboring people of all classes.”

Some northern white workers went yet another step further, recognizing that they and the slaves had a common enemy in the northern capitalist class as well as in the slaveocracy. “The factory operatives,” wrote Abolitionist George W. Putnam in 1852, “felt that the northern capitalist was closely akin to the Southern slaveholder, and that the design of the Slave Power and the Money Power is to crush both black and white.” But this was an argument that the Abolitionists themselves could not make, for capitalists like Gerrit Smith and the Tappan brothers were too important to their movement. They did not benefit directly from southern slavery, as had the northern capitalists in the gradualist movement, but they certainly depended on the exploitation of wage labor.

While the “united front” of progressive capitalists and other anti-slavery activists seems on the surface to have been a strength of the Abolitionist movement, the limitations it imposed hampered the movement as well. In particular, many northern workers were put off by the indifference (or even hostility) of Abolitionist leaders to their own oppression. Labor papers criticized those Abolitionists who had “pity for the southern slave, but would crush with an iron hand the white laborer of the north.”

Garrison, for example, had denounced the trade-union movement in the first issue of The
Liberator as a conspiracy to "inflame the minds of our working classes against the more opulent." Frederick Douglass, in contrast, spoke out often in favor of wage workers' efforts to organize for better working conditions. Wendell Phillips still thought in 1847 that northern workers were "neither wronged nor oppressed," though he modified this view a year later and campaigned actively for the eight-hour day after the Civil War.

In April 1861, the Mechanics Phalanx of Lowell, Massachusetts became the first regiment ready to march off to the Civil War, followed quickly by Wisconsin lumberjacks and Irish, Polish and Italian workingmen from New York. Entire local unions of printers, spinners, miners, machinists, and iron molders enlisted en masse. They, and thousands like them, were moved by Abolitionist ideas, the result of much ideological struggle.

The working class was vastly overrepresented in the Union Army relative to its proportion in the general population. How far would the Abolitionists have gotten in winning the workers to the cause without an analysis of how the racist slave system hurt them, too? How much farther might the movement for equality have gone if abolitionism itself had taken a decisive turn toward the working class?

DIRECT ACTION OR ELECTORAL POLITICS?

Throughout the late 1830s and early '40s, Abolitionists debated hotly about what direction the movement should take. A major split occurred between those who favored forming a bourgeois political party to seek elected office in order to legislate against slavery, and those who believed that an end to slavery and racism could only happen through agitation and development of a popular movement.

The first group rallied around the Liberty Party, especially under the leadership of Salmon P. Chase after 1840. They rested their case on the argument that the Constitution, properly understood and enforced, would prohibit Federal government involvement with slavery. Their strategy was to build a broad-based electoral coalition by downplaying or even rejecting the more "extreme" views of abolition. For example, Chase argued strongly that the Liberty Party should not encourage slaves to run away. They hoped in this way to appeal to more voters: clearly black people, and women, who had no vote were
less important to them.

This electoral strategy was quite successful—on its own terms. During the 1840s, northern capitalists became less dependent on Southern capital and shipping contracts, and began to develop an independent outlook which often clashed with the interests of slaveowners. Thus the slavery issue increasingly polarized the nation, and found its way into electoral politics.

The Mexican-American War intensified this process, splitting both major parties. Delighted political Abolitionists reorganized as the Free Soil Party for the 1848 elections, taking in dissident Democrats and Whigs—though not without internal struggle over the political line. In doing so, its main focus shifted from anti-slavery to opposing the extension of slavery into the territories. It reorganized again in 1854, taking shape as the Republican Party and won the Presidency for Lincoln in 1860.

But it was Lincoln who had said in his 1858 senatorial campaign that “I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races.”

It was Lincoln who wrote in 1862—after war had already broken out—that “if I could save the Union without freeing any slave, I would do it.”

The opportunist electoral strategy did nothing to hasten the destruction of slavery. It set back the cause by building illusions about the federal government and the constitution.

What about those who rejected electoral politics?

Most white leaders among them were still Christian pacifist “non-resistants.” But their unwillingness to compromise the principle of immediate abolition allowed them to take part in the leftward development of the movement.

In rejecting mainstream capitalist politics, they were able to develop a radical critique of federal government complicity in the perpetuation of slavery. They were thus generally more prepared than the “political” (that is, electoral) Abolitionists to reject capitalist government authority when it stood in the way of anti-slavery action.

**MEXICAN-AMERICAN WAR: CRISIS AND DECISION**

When President Polk annexed Texas in 1845 and declared war on Mexico a year later, he set in motion a process that would have a profound impact on the
Abolitionist movement. War has a way of intensifying contradictions in society, and this was no exception. "The Mexican War and slavery will derange all party calculations," predicted Charles Sumner, "The Abolitionists have at least got their lever upon a fulcrum where it can operate."

Democrat and Whig politicians alike—with only a handful of exceptions—supported the war. Even those, like Lincoln, who complained about the way it had been started still voted repeatedly for military appropriations. Racism ran wild: pro-war propagandists ranted about the "destiny of the Anglo-Saxon race" and even some vocal opponents of the war, such as the Abolitionist Theodore Parker, referred to Mexicans as a "wretched race." Thousands of volunteers, many of them impoverished immigrants, signed up to fight. Some Abolitionists, like William Jay, despaired that slavery would now spread to Texas and California "& will there mock all our puny efforts to destroy her."

But radical abolitionism moved sharply to the left during the year-long war, even as the electoral wing of the movement turned to the right. First, many Abolitionists became clearer on the role of the federal government. Earlier, many radical Abolitionists had shunned bourgeois politics as inherently corrupt, as they thought any human government must be. They had also noted that the many Southern slaveowners who were congressmen or other government officials tainted the whole institution. But the Mexican-American War—with federal troops mobilized under the American flag to take by force new territory for the expansion of the slave system—clearly demonstrated that the federal government was dominated by the growing strength of the "slave power." Abstract opposition became concrete: the once-pacifist Garrison’s Liberator even called for the military defeat of the U.S. troops. "We only hope that, if blood has had to flow, that it has been that of the Americans," he wrote, "and that the next news we shall hear will be that General Scott and his army are in the hands of the Mexicans. We wish him and his troops no bodily harm," Garrison added, "but the most utter defeat and disgrace."

Second, the Abolitionists’ warnings about "slave power" control now found a mass audience. An anti-slavery convention in 1839, for example, had declared that "the slave power is waging a deliberate and determined war against the liberties of the free states." Many now saw that the
Mexican-American War, designed to expand the power of the Southern slave-owners, as evidence of "slave-power" control of the country. Indeed, slaveholders themselves were calling for the annexation, not only of Texas and Mexico, but of Cuba and Nicaragua as well. Northern Democrats and so-called "Conscience" Whigs, who had thus far deferred to southern interests within their own parties, now came out against the extension of slavery into the territories, although not for abolition of slavery itself.

And as the war continued, opposition mounted. "Neither have I the least idea of 'joining' you, or in any way assisting the unjust war waging against Mexico," a young man wrote to the Cambridge Chronicle, "I won't go." Those who had joined, for adventure or (more likely) for money, became disgruntled. "The balance of [our officers] are very tyrannical and brutal toward the men," wrote a Pennsylvania volunteer, "A soldier's life is very disgusting." A group of Irish volunteers deserted en masse to form the "San Patricio" (St. Patrick's) battalion of the Mexican Army. Even volunteer regiments from the Southern states of Virginia, Mississippi, and North Carolina mutinied in northern Mexico. Over nine thousand U.S. troops deserted. We don't know what all these young men thought about slavery, but clearly they were no longer willing to fight for it.

The war intensified contradictions within the Abolitionist movement as well. The old petition campaigns went by the boards. The split between radical and electoral strategies widened. Some white Abolitionists—those most profoundly influenced by the religious-pacifist ideology—withdraw from the struggle to join Christian utopian communities like Hopedale, or other such diversions. But others—the majority—deepened their commitment and their understanding. They began to absorb the lesson that American capitalist politicians as a body would defend slavery and racism. They learned that the fight against slavery was not just another reform struggle like temperance (the anti-alcohol movement) or prison reform. Like anti-racists in later periods (and today in particular) many Abolitionists learned that in order to win, you have to be prepared to break the rules, struggling actively outside of the law. During the Mexican-American War, for example, John Brown first began to formulate his plans to establish an anti-slavery guerrilla army in the Appalachian Mountains of Virginia, heart of the slaveholding south.
The Underground Railroad:

ABOLITIONISTS RAISE THE LEVEL OF CLASS STRUGGLE

By the 1840s, the main form of Abolitionist activity revolved around what had become known as the Underground Railroad. Thousands of black fugitives “rode” to freedom, aided by a growing network of over three thousand black and white anti-racists extending across the country (but mainly in the North). Harriet Tubman, an escaped slave, and other courageous “conductors” (men and women, black and white) went into the South to bring escaped slaves out. John Fairfield, white son of a Virginia slaveholder, travelled all over the south to bring slaves out in groups of up to twenty-eight, until his death during a slave insurrection in 1860. Jane Lewis, a black resident of Ohio, ferried fugitives across the Ohio River in a rowboat. Elijah Anderson, also black, led more than a thousand to freedom in five years, before he was thrown into the Kentucky prison where he died.

These heroes had an organization behind them. “Stations” every ten or twenty miles sheltered fugitives during the day, and sent coded messages ahead to the next station. Disguises, food, and supplies were provided by many in the north and south whose names appear in no records. Abolitionist orators and other publicly identified agents of the movement raised money to support the expeditions South and for other costs. And the frequency and boldness of escapes increased with time. By 1850, some one hundred thousand slaves had been helped to freedom.

Running slaves away—even in such numbers—could weaken the slave system but could not end it. But the Underground Railroad also advanced abolitionism as a movement. Stories of the conditions which blacks faced in the South, including the elaborate system of highway patrols and passes they had to avoid, provided compelling evidence of the evils of the slave system. Slaveholders’ attempts to infiltrate and spy on the Underground Railroad were soon discovered, and underlined the threat posed by the slaveocracy to liberty in the north. Free black communities in the northern states and in Canada grew in numbers and in boldness. And ex-slaves—most prominently Frederick Douglass—became key leaders of the movement. A convention of black Abolitionists declared in 1854 that “our relations to the Anti-Slavery movement must be
and are changed. Instead of depending on it we must lead it.” This leadership meant less Christian pacifism, more militancy, and a more serious light against racism.

Supporting the Underground Railroad meant giving aid and financial support to escaped slaves, but it also meant confronting slaveowners or bounty hunters, chasing them, and sometimes even fighting them. Such incidents were rare in the forties, for blacks were protected by law in many Northern states, and the Abolitionists had established legal defense funds to protect blacks from being taken back to the South once they had escaped to freedom. But they did occur, and convinced a growing number of both blacks and whites that armed struggle would eventually be necessary to defeat slavery.

Fugitive Slave Act:

ABOLITIONISM CONFRONTS REPRESSION

By the close of the forties Southern slaveholders were clamoring for an end to the growing stream of slaves escaping to the North. They feared the growing power of the Abolitionists and the spread of anti-slavery sentiments throughout the North. Many saw that they would have to fight to preserve their racist system of exploitation. In 1850 the Fugitive Slave Law gave Southern slaveowners and their agents the right (already written into the U.S. Constitution) to claim escaped slaves in the North. More: by offering greater rewards to federal agents who approved slaveholders’ claims to blacks in the north than to those who denied such claims, the federal government actually encouraged the enslavement of black people who had been living as freedmen in the north. And in a direct assault on the Abolitionists, the law required all citizens in the north to assist slave-catchers and federal marshals when asked to do so.

For the Abolitionists this posed a major challenge. Would they abide by the law, as some Union-minded northerners preached, or would they engage in violent struggle to defend black people in their own towns? The principle of non-violence had been easy to maintain as long as the struggle against slavery was waged chiefly in the South, or in raising money, but now the battleground shifted to the North. The Underground Railroad slowed down for a time, as some Abolitionists and many supporters hesitated. “This is the darkest day of our cause,” lamented Senator Charles Sum-
ner in 1852. But Sumner’s view was distorted by his immersion in electoral politics. Although many did retreat in the face of the fascistic Fugitive Slave law, the Abolitionist movement took yet another step forward. “It now seems that the Fugitive Slave Law was to be the means of making more Abolitionists than all the lectures we have had for years,” John Brown wrote to his wife in November, 1850. He was right. Events escalated quickly in the years following 1851, and for most Abolitionist leaders, non-violence became a relic of the past.

When slave-owners’ agents appeared in Boston in the fall of 1850 searching for escaped slaves, they were told to leave town in five days or face the consequences. They left, but later came back and enlisted the aid of the federal and local authorities. Ex-slaves were usually spirited away to Canada or Great Britain in such situations, but in 1851 federal marshals in Boston arrested a black waiter named Shadrack and took him to the courthouse. An angry mob of whites and blacks gathered outside, broke into the court, and took Shadrack off to Canada before the authorities could do anything.

Later that same year, another ex-slave was arrested, and it took more than 300 federal marshals and troops to prevent a large crowd from seizing him back again. Workers in Lynn expressed their outrage at racist inequality by tearing apart a train which had stopped there to eject Frederick Douglass for riding on a car reserved for whites. In Christiana, Pennsylvania, two dozen armed black men killed a slave owner and wounded his son and two bounty hunters when they captured two fugitives. “Civil War” proclaimed one local newspaper immediately after this incident, and it was right. The movement against slavery which had started so timidly some twenty years earlier had finally resulted in open gunfire to defend black people.

Conflict impelled the Abolitionist movement forward. As the conflict became more intense, no one could avoid taking sides, and outside of the South (where anti-racism was viciously repressed) most chose the side of abolition. Incensed by Federal efforts to capture fugitive slaves in 1854, one staid Boston capitalist wrote, “we went to bed one night old fashioned, conservative, Compromise Union Whigs & waked up stark mad Abolitionists.” The Abolitionists, ignoring calls for compromise, had not buckled under to the Fugitive Slave Law. Instead, they had stepped up the struggle-and their movement
grew.

Bleeding Kansas:

ABOLITIONISTS ON THE OFFENSIVE

Abolitionists had broken the back of the Fugitive Slave Act, and therefore the Compromise of 1850 between northern and southern capitalists. The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, which would allow the voters of these territories to decide whether to allow slavery there, was the next concession made by the North to patch over differences. “Free-Soilers” soon began to move in, most of them farmers seeking land under the auspices of the New England Emigrant Aid Society, an investment company. But slaveowners and their agents, especially in Missouri, began pouring in, too. The front in the anti-slavery war had shifted to Kansas.

The slaveholders’ forces were both more committed ideologically and more experienced in the use of violence than most of the free-soilers, many of whom opposed slavery because they didn’t want black people for neighbors. Pro-slavery forces unleashed a bloody reign of terror, and were on the verge of winning control, when a new force entered the picture: a dedicated white Abolitionist named John Brown.

John Brown had long been part of the Underground Railroad, but he had not spent much time with other white Abolitionists, preferring to confer with black Abolitionists like Dr. James McCune Smith and Henry Highland Garnet. Although he, too, was strongly motivated by religious feeling, he had quickly abandoned the pacifism of “non-resistance” and had little interest in electoral politics. When he decided in 1839 to devote his entire energies to abolition, his thoughts turned to direct action. He soon formulated a plan to escalate the work of the Underground Railroad with the formation of a guerrilla army based in the Appalachians, to run off slaves in even larger numbers, thereby destroying the value of slavery property (as he explained to Frederick Douglass) by making it insecure. In 1851 he had helped to organize the
"League of the Gileadites," a group of forty-four black Abolitionists in Springfield, Ohio who pledged to rescue fugitives there. "Hold on to your weapons," Brown advised them, "and never be persuaded to leave them, part with them, or have them far away from you." This episode illustrates Brown's main strengths as an organizer: he had early on shed any illusions about the need for violence, and he was anti-racist to the core.

As the struggle for control of Kansas escalated, Brown organized and led some of the more militant free-soilers to fight pro-slavery forces there with repeating rifles and artillery. And in May 1856, with the free-soil capital of Lawrence burned to the ground and the proslavery forces apparently in control, Brown went on the offensive. He led a small band of fighters in the dead of the night to the Swamp of the Swan, where they took seven notorious pro-slavery thugs from their homes and chopped off their heads with broadswords.

This bold anti-racist terror turned the tide, emboldening the free-soilers once more and preventing the spread of slavery to Kansas. More importantly, it posed the question of violence to other Abolitionists as it never had been before. Brown's own son Frederick—himself an Abolitionist who had fought in the Kansas war—said, "I could not feel as if it was right." But within months, events had proved that Brown had understood correctly the objective situation in Kansas. James Townley, an eye-witness to the raid, wrote later that at the time he "thought that the transaction was terrible" but later "became satisfied that it resulted in good to the Free State cause. The pro-slavery men were dreadfully terrified, and large numbers of them soon left the Territory.

As Dubois put it:

the man who in all this bewildering broil was least the puppet of circumstances—the man who most clearly saw the real crux of the conflict, most definitely knew his own convictions and was readiest at the crisis for decisive action, was a man whose leadership lay not in his office, wealth, or influence, but in the white flame of his utter devotion to an ideal.

Thousands came to agree that violence was absolutely necessary, and to respect Brown as a leader. This was a critical step both for the Abolitionists and the racists in the South. Both sides became convinced that the dispute over slavery would not be settled peacefully. In many respects, the civil war in "Bloody Kansas" marked the culmination of fifteen years of agitation for an immediate end to slavery and the beginning of the Civil War.
Harper’s Ferry:

THE APEX OF ABOLITIONISM

Kansas was a victory for the free-soil cause and a big step forward for the movement, but from the anti-slavery point of view it was (in Brown’s word) an “abortion.” Brown was more determined than ever to carry out his well-developed plan to strike a decisive blow against slavery (not just its extension) in the heart of Virginia. And now, at last, a significant section of the Abolitionist movement was ready to take this idea seriously.

The history of John Brown’s raid on the federal arsenal at Harper’s Ferry, Virginia (now West Virginia) is one of the most inspiring stories of all in the history of anti-racist struggle. There is not room here to do full justice to it, and English-language readers are strongly urged to read the article John Brown’s Raid in *PL Magazine* (Fall 1979) or the account in W. E. B. DuBois’ biography *John Brown*. Here we will concentrate on the significance of the raid in the development of the Abolitionist movement.

Brown proposed to organize a small group of heavily armed black and white fighters to take the arsenal, capture the weapons stored there, and then advance into the mountains to set up 3 string of guerrilla bases. From these his soldiers would make forays into nearby counties with huge concentrations of slaves, and win the slaves (plantation by plantation) to escape in large groups. Those who wished to join Brown’s army would be armed, and the rest taken by the Underground Railroad to the northern states or Canada. The army would live off the produce of the land, which Brown considered to belong rightfully to the slaves.

Brown needed to organize three things to carry out the plan: a few dozen men (except for Harriet Tubman, Brown didn’t want women) to join the initial action; a network of organizations to provide support and future recruits; and money for pikes, guns, and transportation for the vanguard raiders. The raiders themselves were recruited by Brown personally: a few from his family, a few from the Kansas struggle, a few from among his acquaintances in the free black communities, others he had met in the course of his anti-slavery work. For the rest, Brown turned to organized abolitionism.

For money Brown could appeal to radical white Abolitionist groups like the National Kansas Committee and the Boston
John Brown’s target—the Federal Arsenal at Harper’s Ferry.

Relief Committee. He did not trust them enough to let them in on his plans—except to hint broadly that material given to him would not necessarily be used in Kansas—but many of them trusted him. The wealthy Gerrit Smith told him, “I have known you for many years, and have highly esteemed you as long as I have known you.” These men, who probably preferred not to know his plans anyway, gave him custody of several hundred rifles as well as a pledge of money. But to collect the money he needed, Brown had to describe his plans in detail to a few trusted friends among the white Boston Abolitionists, meeting in secret. Frank B. Sanborn later reported being astonished and dismayed at first by Brown’s bold plan. But after several days of intense discussion, these former pacifists and non-resistants agreed to back Brown. “We cannot give him up to die alone,” Smith told Sanborn, “we must support him.”

For organizational support, however, Brown turned to the network of black Abolitionist communities and groups. He knew far more about the black secret society in the U.S. (known variously as the League of Freedom, the Liberty League, or the “American Mysteries”) and the fourteen Canadian “True Bands,” numbering over a thousand members, than did other white Abolitionists. Brown’s confidence in launching what would amount to an armed in-
The struggle among the slaves was firmly based in the ties he had developed over the years with free black people, many of whom had been slaves themselves. He conferred with Douglass, Garnet, Martin Delaney, J. W. Loguen, and other prominent black Abolitionists, but did not base his plans on them either. Douglass, for example, liked the idea of armed guerrillas running off slaves, but objected to an attack on the arsenal because, in his words, “it would be an attack upon the Federal government, and would array the whole country against us.” He and Brown argued for two days: “he for striking a blow that would instantly rouse the country, and I for the policy of gradually and unaccountably drawing slaves off to the mountains, as at first suggested and proposed by him.” In the end, Douglass was not convinced, hesitating because of “my discretion or my cowardice, perhaps something of both,” as he later admitted. But the fugitive Shields Green, with them at the time, decided, “I guess I’ll go with the old man.” The renowned “General” Harriet Tubman, a frequent user of the Appalachian “tracks” of the Underground Railroad, also pledged to be there; only illness, in the end, kept her away.

Brown relied on the masses. He carefully laid the groundwork for an interracial convention in Chatham, Canada, attended by 33 black and 12 white Abolitionists, with black men presiding. Even to this group he did not reveal the details of his tactical plan, but the convention struggled over principles, adopted a constitution to govern Brown’s army, and established a leadership body that functioned until after the Harper’s Ferry raid. John Brown’s religious commitment may have driven him to put his life on the line to end slavery, but his materialist grasp of the practical situation led him to build an organization to carry out the struggle.

The political struggle at this convention illuminates the limits of the Abolitionist movement, of which Brown and his group were surely the highest expression. Brown clearly saw the need to organize violent struggle against slavery, and he was ready and willing to take on federal authorities with an armed attack on the arsenal. But he was a patriot, not a revolutionary, when it came to the United States government. The forty-sixth article of his constitution stated that “the foregoing articles shall not be understood so as in any way to encourage the overthrow of any state government, or the general government of the United States.” The black coppersmith G. J. Reynolds, a leader of the
Underground Railroad in Sandusky City, disagreed sharply with Brown over this. He said he felt no allegiance to the nation that had robbed and humiliated him, but was unable to convince a majority of the convention. Again, some at the convention argued that the best time for an attack would be while the United States was at war with a major foreign power. Brown was deeply disturbed by this suggestion, not because it might mean postponing an attack but because he "would be the last one to take advantage of my country in the face of a foreign foe." For him, racism in any form (including slavery) was a diabolical evil that disfigured American society; he did not understand that it is a cornerstone of capitalism itself. In this respect, religious idealism clearly dominated his thinking.

Brown and his soldiers succeeded in capturing Harper's Ferry on October 17, 1859. But for reasons that are not fully clear they delayed their departure for the mountains, and were trapped in the Harper's Ferry firehouse by the arrival of one hundred United States Marines, commanded by Colonel Robert E. Lee of Virginia. They chose to fight. Fifteen of Brown's soldiers died in the battle or were executed afterward. Brown himself was captured, tried and convicted for treason against the state of Virginia, and executed quickly, just six weeks after his heroic raid. But much happened in those six weeks.

Abolitionism was electrified by the news of Brown's bold and unsuccessful frontal assault on the slave system. The first reactions of many seemed to justify Brown's long-standing contempt for the Garrisonian "non-resistants." Gerrit Smith, who had given Brown $1000, now denied knowledge of his plans. Samuel Gridley Howe vacillated on the witness stand, then fled to Canada. Douglass, hearing that President Buchanan and Governor Wise of Virginia were on his track, also fled. Even then, however, George L. Stearns of the Boston Relief Committee declared "John Brown to be the representative man of this century, as Washington was of the last."

And Brown's trial helped rally public opinion in the North against slavery in the weeks that followed. The conservative Republican journalist Horace Greeley admitted reluctantly on the eve of the trial that "the end of Slavery in Virginia and the Union is ten years nearer than it seemed a few weeks ago." Northern workers and Abolitionists held mass meetings on his behalf. German Marxists in the Social Working Men's Association of Cincinnati, Ohio
resolved that “The act of John Brown has powerfully contributed to bring out the hidden consciousness of the majority of the people.” Even pacifists could no longer criticize Brown. “I claim to be a Non-Resistant,” Stephen S. Foster declared, “but not to be a fool. I think John Brown has shown himself a man, in comparison with the Non-Resistants.” Tens of thousands across the country understood the last written words of the old man: “I, John Brown, am quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away but with blood. I had, as I now think vainly, flattered myself that without very much bloodshed it might be done.” At least for the time being, nonviolence was dead.

THE CIVIL WAR: SLAVERY DESTROYED BY MASS VIOLENCE

Frederick Douglass later declared that “If John Brown did not end the war that ended slavery, he did, at least, begin the war that ended slavery.” The Harper’s Ferry raid and Brown’s trial showed many on both sides that armed conflict was necessary. By the time of his trial, Brown was hailed as a hero in the North, and condemned by slaveholders in the South. The black population of Virginia was indeed aroused by the raid, even though it had been crushed. Five incendiary fires in the immediate neighborhood in one week testified to that. Slaveholders in the counties adjoining Harper’s Ferry frantically sold off their slaves, often at a monetary loss. Fearful that yet other such raids would occur in the future, Southern racists decided to secede from the Union when Lincoln (a Republican backed by many Abolitionists) was elected President a year later. With that decision—and the subsequent shelling of Fort Sumter in Charleston, South Carolina—the official war began.

In 1861 the workers of Lynn, all of them volunteers, marched off to war, singing a new song: “John Brown’s body lies a-mouldering in the grave/But his soul goes marching on.” Theirs was not a war for the Union as much as it was a war against slavery. They were openly in alliance with the millions of slaves in the South who had struggled against slavery for generations. The workers’ battle song also testified to the efforts of hundreds of Abolitionists who had struggled to sustain and build their movement in the face of what appeared at times to be overwhelming odds. Who could have guessed that a small band of radical religious leaders, supported by a network of free blacks and
women petitioners scattered in small communities across the country, would become a violent mass movement against racism that would at long last bring "King Cotton" to his knees?

Lincoln and the statesmen of the North wanted, above all, to restore the union of the states. They refused outright to free the slaves, and turned away thousands of free black people who volunteered immediately to serve in the Union army. Even Lincoln's famous "Emancipation Proclamation" only freed the slaves in those states which were still rebelling: that is, those states which would not abide by it anyway.

But once the war began, it could not end without abolishing chattel slavery. Two years into the bloody conflict with no end in sight, Congress was persuaded that the North could only win the war with the help of black troops. Thousands in the North enlisted in the "United States Colored Troops" and, despite racist harassment and lower pay, were among the best and the bravest soldiers in the army. Thousands more in the South took the first opportunity to leave the plantations and join the Union Army, even when that meant doing the hardest and dirtiest menial jobs. And in March 1865, only weeks before the final collapse of the Confederacy, a desperate Jefferson Davis signed a "Negro Soldier Law" permitting slaveholders (with the consent of their state governments) to free their slaves to serve as soldiers in the Confederate Army. It was too late for the Confederacy, and much too late for black Southerners: many, if not most, had already freed themselves by then anyway.

CONCLUSION: LESSONS OF THE ABOLITIONIST MOVEMENT

The Civil War was the culmination of the Abolitionist movement. The movement succeeded, although not exactly in the way that Abolitionists had expected. And weaknesses that had been secondary in earlier decades now came to the fore. With Lincoln and the Republicans in power, and leading an army against the hated southern slaveocracy, the confidence of most Abolitionists in the federal government was restored. The strategy of petitions was resurrected, once again begging Congress to legislate the slaves free. Abolitionists no longer fought federal marshalls, but commanded federal troops and were elected to federal office. After the Emancipation Proclamation
realized (at least formally) their demands, the movement as such disbanded. The disastrous results only became clear years after the war, in 1876, when capitalist interests dictated the sacrifice of legally free but economically enslaved black southern sharecroppers to the still-wealthy southern plantation owners. The federal government pulled its troops out of the south, and neither black southerners nor anti-racists in the north were organized independently to defend their own interests. If you rely on a capitalist “democratic” government, you can’t end racism.

If the strength of the Abolitionist movement was its staunch commitment to the principle of an immediate end to chattel slavery, its main weakness was that its principles did not extend further. Abolitionists generally did not look beyond legal emancipation to the social conditions that could make former slaves (or anyone else) free in a real, material sense. To the extent that they did, the model of “freedom” was the independence of the skilled craftsman or farmer, already becoming an anachronism in an industrializing world. More often, Abolitionists who looked beyond emancipation thought in anarchistic terms of freedom from society: the replacement of human government by a “kingdom of god,” and of material concerns by a struggle for spiritual perfection. John Brown, for example, thought that society should be organized “on a less selfish basis; for while material interests gained something by the deification of pure selfishness, men and women lost much by it.” He had a point, of course, but by placing “material interests” in opposition to unselfishness he left open only the possibility of an abstract Christian community of interest. Oppression and inequality in the modern world are firmly rooted in capitalism. If you don’t end capitalism, you can’t end racism.

What, then, can we learn from the Abolitionists? More than anything else, the importance of political struggle: not only over strategy and tactics, but also about ultimate goals. To put it another way, one example of a social law is the generalization that the internal struggle within a social movement determines (within limits, of course) its outcome. Those who understand this law and fight hard to develop the sharpest possible line, and to struggle for it in the broadest possible way, will have the most effect on the course of events. Many of the most important aspects of the ideological struggle today were already issues among the Abolitionists: willingness to break the law when the interests of the laboring classes require it;
the need for violence to end class oppression; the need to build multi-racial unity with a conscious struggle against racist ideas and practices within and outside the movement; the importance of rejecting religious idealism in favor of a scientific materialist analysis of society. Let's say it again: what you do counts. And of all the things you do, struggling for the correct political line counts most.

AFTERWORD

Some bourgeois historians tell us that history is not and never can be a science. Others try to make history into a science mechanically, by leaving out any reference to the consciousness of the people whose actions, in groups and as classes, have shaped the past. Both are wrong. Communist philosophy (often called Marxism-Leninism or dialectical materialism) gives us the tools to analyze history scientifically. The better we understand history, the more confidence we will have in the working class. The better prepared we will be for our role in making history.

The course of history is not linear, and it is not smooth. There is no magic formula for predicting exactly what will happen when. But those who say that history can therefore not be a science are wrong. Is a science of physics impossible because we cannot predict the path of each individual water molecule in a river, or because we have no formula to describe the river's turbulent flow through a rocky shoal? Of course not. Just as we know that the river flows to the sea, we know that the racist slave system had to come to an end.

But how much longer might it have taken without the boldness of David Walker, the persistence of William Lloyd Garrison, the courage of Harriet Tubman, the insight and daring of John Brown? More to the point, how much longer might slavery lasted without the ideological struggle that enabled the Abolitionists to learn from their mistakes and move forward? None of these people was a super-hero. Their strength was that they learned to grasp the essential contradictions of the society in which they lived.

In Lenin's words, political life as a whole is an endless chain consisting of an infinite number of links. The whole art of politics lies in finding and taking as firm a grip as we can of the link that is least likely to be struck from our hands, the one that is most important at the given moment, the one that most of all guarantees its possessor the possession of the whole chain.

The Abolitionists saw that the interests of the vast majority of
the laboring people of the United States demanded the immediate abolition of slavery. Therefore they had the confidence to continue organizing energetically and patiently even when the tide seemed to be turning against them. And when their enemies lashed out at them—for example, with the Fugitive Slave Law—they boldly turned these attacks around, and moved the struggle to a higher stage. They understood that history was on their side—and that every action counted.

The struggle for equality has not yet been won. The Abolitionists did not see that so-called “free labor” would become wage slavery. The best of them saw that racism was the bosses’ tool to divide and oppress laborers—but even they did not see that racism was so fundamental to capitalism that to destroy either one, both must be torn down. Revolutionary history, like the history of natural science, is full of partial truths. It moves forward by recognizing, through practice, the limits of its ideas and the nature of its errors. The Abolitionists made mistakes. The PROGRESSIVE LABOR PARTY has made mistakes in the past, and we will make more in the future. The only way to avoid mistakes is to donothing—and that is the worst mistake of all. We cannot see the whole process of social development at once, and we should not expect to anticipate every twist and turn in the road. But we can grasp the essential dynamic of the process from the part we can see.

To win equality we need communism. To win communism, workers must fight for it: millions of workers, won to communist ideas. Now and in the foreseeable future the task of leadership is to guarantee a sharp and ongoing ideological struggle in the broadest possible way. It is to build a base for communism and the PROGRESSIVE LABOR PARTY. It is to win new leaders into this struggle. Just as millions in the nineteenth century U.S. who feared the degradation of their labor learned to fight against slavery, so will those today who hate the decadence, misery, and exploitation of capitalism learn to fight for communism. If the key slogan of 1859 was “immediate abolition of slavery, by any means necessary,” the word of the hour today is “fight for communism.” We have a world to win.

By B.C.