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### Abolition and Labor

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## ABOLITION AND LABOR

### I. APPEAL OF THE ABOLITIONISTS TO THE NORTHERN WORKING CLASSES

*Williston H. Lofton*

During the years of the intensive antislavery agitation the leaders of the movement made constant efforts to arouse the urban workers of the North as a group to support the cause of emancipation. Many of the abolitionists were well aware of the appeal which could be made to the artisans, mechanics, and laborers. Such an appeal would, in a measure, remove the antislavery movement from the realm of moral reform to one of economic reform by proffering help to enable the workers to better their own lot. There was some hesitancy about adopting such a strategy. Some of the persons prominent in the antislavery movement insisted that their fight was essentially a moral one, and that to combine with other liberal movements would weaken all and strengthen none.<sup>1</sup> It was not always a lack of sympathy for the lot of the workers which kept some of the abolition-

<sup>1</sup> James Russell Lowell, *The Anti-Slavery Papers of James Russell Lowell*, vol. ii (Boston, 1902). Essay entitled: "Putting the Cart before the Horse." Cf. Wendell Phillips, *Speeches, Letters and Papers*, 1st Series (Boston, 1892), p. 90. Gilbert Barnes, *The Antislavery Impulse, 1830-1844* (New York, 1933) p. 197. Also, *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, June 20, 1850.

ists aloof from the labor movement, but rather a matter of policy.<sup>2</sup>

Some of those most interested in the cause of emancipation envisioned the harvest which might be reaped for the cause among the urban workers of the North, but were afraid that, through their indifference, the anti-slavery societies might alienate the source of strength which could prove so valuable. One such was Dr. William E. Channing, who, though never a doctrinaire abolitionist, stood forth strongly for freedom for the slave. In addressing the New England Anti-Slavery Convention at Boston in May, 1850, he advised the group to seek out the city worker of the North and to draw him into the fight against slavery. He indicated the vital connection between the anti-slavery struggle and the labor movement when he told the assembled group:

I believe that one reason why the working classes of the whole country have not come up by instinct and in masses, to the support of Freedom, is, that our Anti-Slavery friends have not gone far enough in showing that man is man everywhere. They have not carried their doctrine of equality in its application to our social usages. I do not mean to say they may not have done this in their hearts, but they have not shown their feelings outwardly. The thorough Emancipation of Work alone corresponds to the Ideal of our Nation. What is the power that the slaveholders exercise? What is it? It is the power of combined Capital and Party Organization, working upon the cupidity of Northern politicians. Is it not true? Then should the Abolitionists grapple here with the persons who support the Arch Traitor this year, with those who oppress the poor. Then would all just men be with you; and if this were made plain to the People of this land, they could not but see that their cause is one with yours.<sup>3</sup>

In the same vein Edward West, a leading reformer of the

<sup>2</sup> It is true that some of Garrison's early views were such as to alienate the northern artisans and laborers. He had denounced labor leaders as attempting "to inflame the minds of our working classes against the more opulent, and to persuade men that they are contemned and oppressed by a wealthy aristocracy." *Liberator*, January 1, 1831.

<sup>3</sup> *National Anti-Savery Standard*, June 20, 1850.

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day, though not an abolitionist, advised the anti-slavery leaders that the success of their movement depended upon showing to the "Commercial and Working Classes of America, not only that slavery is unjust and inconsistent with Christian Dispensation, but also show how their private interest is really injured by slavery."<sup>4</sup> West suggested a plan for indoctrinating the workers, believing that, "if the working people of the States could be brought, by lectures delivered to them by working men, or by other means, to understand this encroachment upon their fair earnings, how few among them, especially the Irish portion would by their votes sanction the longer continuance of slavery."<sup>5</sup>

This same view was voiced by Horace Greeley, the liberal editor of the *New York Tribune*, who called upon the abolitionists to invigorate their cause through appeals to the urban workers.<sup>6</sup>

The need to arouse the northern urban workers to the anti-slavery cause was the theme of the *National Era* on several occasions. In an editorial headed, "Politics and Policy" the paper issued the challenge:

Those who have found by bitter experience that the subsisting relations between employer and employed make the latter dependent for existence on the back of the former, and reduce him to a slavery more deplorable, because less pitied, and less veiled by the stupidity of the sufferer than that of the African, will hail us with rapture if we show that our sympathy for the black bondsman of the South makes us alive and not callous to the suffering of the white brethren at our elbow, and that we, who are ourselves under the ban of good society, as incendiaries and fanatics, are ready to cast the same unmeaning epithets on those who apply our own principles to other objects.<sup>7</sup>

And again in 1851 the same paper inquired, "... will the 'working man' who holds that the laborer ought to be part-

<sup>4</sup> *Liberator*, November 10, 1848.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *New York Tribune*, September 30, 1846.

<sup>7</sup> *National Era*, April 17, 1851.



ner and not the mere machinery of capital, step out of his way to give aid, not to the slave, whose sufferings appeal for his compassion, and in any direct way must have his sympathies, but to an anti-slavery party which will do nothing for him.’<sup>8</sup>

The great eastern abolitionist, Garrison, recognized the cogency of the argument but felt that it was not wise to adopt the proposed appeal because, “we are already staggering under the load of responsibilities connected with what we deem to be, for the time being, the most radical movement on the American soil.”<sup>9</sup> However, in spite of the fact that the abolition movement remained primarily a moral issue for the free states, many of the leaders did make efforts to rationalize the movement in terms of a struggle of labor against the employer in the hope of attracting class conscious workers. It was in the decade of the 1830’s that the technique was first used.

The basis of the appeal of the abolitionists to the craftsmen and laborers was that free labor and slave labor were fundamentally antagonistic; that free labor was in jeopardy as long as slavery existed in this country. In 1836 the American Anti-Slavery Society pointed the way to appeal to northern workers when in its convention it resolved:

The third part of the northern response is yet to come. The honest, hard handed, clear-headed, free laborers, and mechanics of the North are yet to reply. This part, the bone and muscle of society has been looking with increasing and kindling interest, while the head and tail of society have been strangely connected in acting the part of the South-Purse-proud aristocrats, and penniless profligates have united in the work of opposing the abolitionists, each according to his ability and talents. There is little hope of converting these parties, till we can change the interests of the one, and take away the grog of the other. But in the middle ground of society is a fair field, where truth bears a hundred fold.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* June 19, 1851.

<sup>9</sup> *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, June 20, 1850.

<sup>10</sup> *Third Annual Report of the American Anti-Slavery Society* (May, 1836) p. 81.

In the same year the Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Society issued an appeal to operatives of that state to rally to the cause of freedom, saying, "Slavery blights the industry of the nation by making labor disreputable. It degrades the laboring population assimilating them to slaves. It leads our statesmen to imagine, and sometimes say, that the laboring people are incompetent to self-government, and thus it emboldens them to treat them as slaves."<sup>11</sup>

The year 1836 was a fertile one for the anti-slavery cause. The adoption of the "gag" resolution by the House of Representatives gave to the abolitionists a point of vantage from which they could preach their doctrines to northern communities. The columns of the *Liberator* (which was quoted widely by other newspapers of the day) were often directed at the workers in an attempt to enlist them in the cause. The grievances of the workers were treated sympathetically by that journal as it pointed out that the laboring population in the North was to "an alarming extent, despised and wronged."<sup>12</sup> At the same time it was alleged that, "there is a proud aristocracy at the north, sympathizing with and publicly approbating the still more haughty aristocracy at the south; and together, it is their aim, if possible, to degrade and defraud workingmen of all classes, irrespective of color."<sup>13</sup>

The theme that slave labor was by its nature hostile to free labor was stressed repeatedly by the anti-slavery societies in their conventions. That slavery tended to degrade labor everywhere and would eventually bring the white artisans and operatives down to the level of the slaves was the warning of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society in 1837. This group sought to rally the "working men of the free states to exert themselves against the system . . . the

<sup>11</sup> *Proceedings of the Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Convention* (February, 1836) p. 23.

<sup>12</sup> *Liberator*, May 14, 1831.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

direct tendency of which is to degrade the laborer everywhere, in the public estimation . . . .”<sup>14</sup> At the same convention the members took steps to refute the claims that the northern mechanics were in a position worse than that of the slaves in the southern states. This claim was termed “a base assertion.” If this were true, so the resolution stated, the next step would be the bettering of the condition of the northern workers by making them slaves so as to remove from their minds the burden of caring for themselves and their families.<sup>15</sup>

The charge that northern laborers were in the same, or worse, condition as the black slaves of the South usually brought a quick denial from the abolitionists. To refute this allegation the *Liberator*, in 1837, issued an address to the “Free Laboring Men and Women of the United States.”<sup>16</sup> The article was an attempt to show the differences between the free laboring men and women of the North and the bondmen of the South. Among the differences noted were freedom of contract of the workers, a different legal status, and an elevated social status. The northern workers were called upon to join the anti-slavery cause with these ringing words: “Come up to the work then, fellow laborers, now while it is day, for the night of oppression cometh when no laborer can work. You have a double motive to act; for not only are you called to plead for your colored brethren and sisters in bonds; but your own rights, your own liberties, your own moral and political existence are at stake. . . .”<sup>17</sup>

On February 4, 1836, John C. Calhoun offered in the Senate a bill to exclude anti-slavery matter from the mails.<sup>18</sup> In support of his measure Calhoun reviewed the

<sup>14</sup> *Proceedings of the Pennsylvania Convention Assembled to Organize a State Anti-Slavery Society* (Harrisburg, 1837) pp. 48-49.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* p. 50.

<sup>16</sup> *Liberator*, December 1, 1837.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Register of Debates in Congress*, vol. xii Part I (1835-36) pp. 383-386.

nature of slavery as an economic institution. In the course of his remarks he expressed the view that in all society one portion of the population lives on the labor of another; the system of slavery in the South was only one aspect of this universal truth. In the distribution of the proceeds of labor "the operatives in any country have little part", according to Calhoun, "with few exceptions as the African in the slaveholding States, in the distribution of the proceeds of his labor."<sup>19</sup>

This comparison of the northern workers with the slaves drew immediate rejoinders and was used by the abolitionists to show the need for northern workers to join the movement so as to combat such doctrines. One of those attempting to answer Calhoun inquired. "Who are the operatives of the North? Freemen! who by law will act for themselves, restrained only from crime by which they may molest the rights of others."<sup>20</sup>

The great abolitionist, James G. Birney, realized the importance of emphasizing the hostility between free labor of the North and the slave system. We find him writing a public letter to three of his co-workers, Myron Holley, Joshua Leavitt, and Elizar Wright, Jr. In the letter Birney discussed the impossibility of northern labor receiving its proper share in federal legislation as long as slavery continued in the country. He felt that, "where labor is partly free and partly slave, the same legislation cannot be made beneficial to both."<sup>21</sup> As proof of this he cited the tariff legislation. The protective tariff had been given hearty support in 1816 by southern interests, but when the free labor North began to outstrip the South the latter section

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* Part IX, p. 76

<sup>20</sup> William Plummer [Cincinnatus], *Freedom's Defence, or a Candid Examination of Mr Calhoun's Report on the Freedom of the Press.* (Worcester, Mass., 1836).

<sup>21</sup> Dwight L. Dummond, *Letters of James Gillespie Birney, 1831-1857* (New York, 1938) vol. i p. 512.

alleged that the tariff policy had been aimed at its destruction and was absolutely injurious to it. As a result northern free labor was forced to suffer through tariff reductions, which were calculated to benefit the slaveholders.

In 1844 Birney returned to this particular anti-slavery argument by which he hoped to attract practical minded northern business men and their employees. In a letter to Russell Everett he expressed his conviction that free northern labor must be hostile to slavery:

Being irreconcilable in their nature, they can never be brought to operate harmoniously together under the same system of legislation. Let no one, then, look for jarrings and dissensions to pass away, or be seen to be passing away, with a certainty of its speedy and entire disappearance.<sup>22</sup>

The sectional influence of the proslavery South upon national legislation gave another valuable economic argument to the abolitionists. That this was true, as far as measures concerning the territories and free land, has long been recognized. Less well known is the use to which the abolitionists put northern opposition to the low tariff policy which southern interests had forced the Democratic party to adopt. The low tariff of 1846 gave an occasion for the abolitionists to appeal again to the northern workers to support their cause. One paper denounced that tariff, holding, "Slaveholders are the enemies of free labor, and having control of the Government they lose no opportunity to bring the whole power to their aid."<sup>23</sup> This same journal was of the opinion that by the tariff of 1846 "free labor of the country was sought to be embarrassed and degraded." And in Congress, Senator Niles of Connecticut alleged that the act of 1846 was a measure "designed to favor the slave labor of the South at the expense of free labor of the North. Fifteen or twenty millions of the products of northern labor

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* vol. ii, p. 831.

<sup>23</sup> *Democratic Standard and Whig of '76*, (Cincinnati, Ohio), August 21, 1846.

are to be sacrificed for the mere hope of benefiting the slave labor of the South.”<sup>24</sup>

The struggle over Kansas afforded the abolitionists another chance to attempt to rally the urban workers to their cause. Senator Wade of Ohio, when speaking against the Lecompton Constitution asserted that the northern artisans were vitally concerned with keeping Kansas free. He argued that if the territories were occupied by slave labor, and free labor were excluded, then the free states would soon have an excessive population made up of capitalists and laborers,—“capitalists being in the language of southern men, substantially the owners of laborers.” “And sirs,” he told the Senate, “whoever contemplates that such a state of things is to be brought through the usurpation of the slave power, does not understand the character of the masses of the people of the free states.”<sup>25</sup>

The anti-slavery publicity intended to draw the artisans and laborers was extensive and varied. In 1846 from Lowell, Massachusetts, the heart of the factory zone, an anti-slavery convention called for the support of “the workingmen and mechanics,” because, “they themselves are the victims of oppression and are therefore specially called upon to remember that those that are in bonds are bound with them; because it is impossible for them to obtain their just rights, so long as the vast body of southern laborers are held and driven as beasts of burden; because there must be chains for all or liberty for all . . . .”<sup>26</sup> At this same meeting the charge was hurled that the working classes of the North, “have long been united with the monopolists and aristocrats to keep in chains and slavery the laborers of the South, and to prosecute and proscribe the free people of color, and they have a mighty work of repentance to per-

<sup>24</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 29th Congress, 1st Session (July 20, 1846) p. 886.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 35th Congress, 1st Session (March 29, 1858) p. 220.

<sup>26</sup> *Liberator*, May 8, 1846. Report of the Middlesex County Anti-Slavery Society.

form, and a large recompense to make to those whom they have so brutally treated; and it is not for them to disclaim against aristocracy and the proud spirit of caste, until they first remove their feet from the neck of the scarred and bleeding slave.’<sup>27</sup>

The immediate benefits which would accrue to the free laborers of the North, if southern slavery were eradicated, were used as a bait for followers. One enterprising anti-slavery lecturer told an audience of factory operatives that if the Negroes in the South were freed there would then be created a market for their products among the three million black customers. This would, of course, increase job opportunities for the factory workers.<sup>28</sup> The demand for products of northern factories, said the writer, would “give new activity to our shops and mills and shipping, and steadier employment, and most likely, higher wages to all kinds of labor here.”

At the same time that the vista of new black consumers in the South was being dangled before northern workers, the slave was being presented in another role by the abolitionists. Southern proposals to establish factories using slave labor were used by the anti-slavery people to arouse among the white workers fears of labor competition. As early as 1834 a Philadelphia correspondent of the *Liberator* wrote of the need for northern workers to ally themselves with the abolitionists because of the dangers facing them from proposals to use black slave labor in southern factories. It was reasoned that if this use were made of the Negro slaves the products of these southern mills would undersell those produced by free white labor in the North and in turn force down the wages in the latter section.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Charles C. Burleigh, “Slavery and the North”, *Anti-Slavery Tracts*, No. 10 (Boston, 1855-56) pp. 9-10.

<sup>29</sup> *Liberator*, December 20, 1834.



The writer of the article inquired whether northern factory workers would be "disposed much longer to uphold a system of oppression which grinds to the dust two millions of their countrymen, when they find that system powerfully tending to reduce themselves in the estimation of the Aristocracy of the country, as well in their resources for the comforts of life, to a condition little better than that of slaves?"

This same idea was the basis of an appeal by the *National Era*, which disputed the common assumption that Negro slaves could not be used successfully as factory operatives. Even then this paper believed, "The free mechanics are feeling the pressure."<sup>30</sup> It was predicted, "The free artisan must come sooner or later to know that chattel slavery must be followed by wages slavery—that a bar of iron and a web of cotton cloth are of no caste, and neither suffer or gain by the prejudice of color. . . . The nominally free operative, engaged upon the same kind of labor with the black slave, must take substantially the same condition."<sup>31</sup> Later in the year this same idea was the theme of another editorial.<sup>32</sup>

The anti-slavery political parties were alert to the wisdom of the economic appeal to the workers. The Liberty party pledged itself in 1846 to secure to "the laborers of all classes the enjoyment of the products of their labor."<sup>33</sup> The party made the call to the urban worker a feature of its platform. In this it was followed by its successor, the Free Soil party.<sup>34</sup> With the rise of the Republican party great stress was placed upon slavery in the territories, yet the appeal to the city worker was not neglected. Soon after the election of 1856 one of the newly elected Republican members of Congress pointed to the stand of the party

<sup>30</sup> July 24, 1851.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *National Era*, October 11, 1851.

<sup>33</sup> *Democratic Standard and Whig of '76*, July 17, 1846.

<sup>34</sup> *National Era*, May 24, 1849.



against slavery and appealed for the support of the urban workers.<sup>35</sup>

In St. Louis, the Republican mayor sought to justify the anti-slavery sentiment of his party and on the basis of it appealed to the "skilled and intelligent free white men" to rally to the party and "unite in guarding the rights of labor and upholding its dignity."<sup>36</sup> This same appeal was voiced by that great party leader, William H. Seward. He sought to attract the newly arrived immigrant by representing the Republican party as "the opponent of African slave labor, and the advocate of free white immigrant white labor."<sup>37</sup> This appeal was directed chiefly at the Irish laborers, whose hostility towards the Negro worker was well known.<sup>38</sup> Other Republican orators, such as Carl Schurz, sought to present to the immigrant the anti-slavery movement within an understandable economic framework.<sup>39</sup> That the fight against slavery was a part of the great struggle of labor could be comprehended by the workers, especially those who had recently arrived on these shores to escape oppression at home, Thus, though the Republican party was not an abolitionist party in all of its elements, it, too, sought to attract the urban workers by resolving the hostility to slavery into the economic pattern of the suppression of labor which had a direct connection with the lot of labor in general.

How successful were these attempts to attract the northern workers? It is difficult to judge the practical results of the campaign. The leaders of the labor movement and their

<sup>35</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 34th Congress 3rd Session, p. 90. Speech of Mr. Cumback of Indiana, December 17, 1856.

<sup>36</sup> *Harper's Weekly*, vol. i No. 17 (April 25, 1857).

<sup>37</sup> William H. Seward, *Immigrant White Free Labor, Or Imported African Slave Labor* (Washington, 1857) p. 5.

<sup>38</sup> William H. Seward, "The West: Its Destiny and Its Duty" *Campaign of 1860*, p. 18. Speech delivered September 21, 1860.

<sup>39</sup> Carl Schurz, "Slavery at War with the Moral Sentiment of the World" *Campaign of 1860*. Speech of August 1, 1860.

associates were not unaware of the plausibility of the arguments but were not easily converted. There were many factors which weakened the appeal made to the workers. However, it is of importance to note that the anti-slavery leaders and many sympathetic politicians saw the possibility of making the fight against human bondage one based on the solidarity of labor, irrespective of color. There were many reasons why this technique could not be used to the fullest. Had it been used it might have made the anti-slavery movement more of a mass agitation and less of one led by intellectuals and kind-hearted philanthropists.

## II. REACTION OF NORTHERN LABOR TO THE ANTI-SLAVERY APPEAL

The reaction of the northern workers and their leaders to the call of the anti-slavery movement was conditioned by several important factors and beliefs based upon the varying situation of labor in the North and upon the racial mores of the free states. At play were such factors as: (1) the worker's own experiences in attempting to establish his place in a changing economic society; (2) the prevailing moral outlook upon slavery as an institution; (3) the racial attitudes of the community toward the free Negroes who dwelt there; (4) the community reaction toward alien labor, whether white or black.

In considering the reaction of the northern workers to the anti-slavery appeal, in so far as that appeal was based upon economic arguments, three definite trends are apparent: (1) The workers exhibited in many instances a general apathy toward the whole movement; (2) among other workers and labor leaders there was shown an active hostility to the cause of the abolitionists; (3) contrasted to these two rejoinders was the active support given to the movement by the labor leaders and their followers. In order to understand this phase of the abolition movement it is

necessary to survey each of these reactions. Since apathy and active hostility toward abolitionism were rather closely connected these trends will be discussed together.

### *Working Class Indifference to Abolitionism*

The anti-slavery leaders often encountered a disheartening indifference to their cause when they appealed to labor leaders and labor reformers for support. This indifference was also shown by many of the workers when their support was sought. This apathy toward the cause of emancipation was not an active hostility, for many labor leaders were sympathetic to the efforts in behalf of the slaves but could not concede the primacy of this reform as compared with other matters more closely pertaining to their own situation. Where coolness of the working classes toward abolitionism was evident it seems to have been based upon three considerations: (1) many of the workers were dissatisfied with their own condition and felt the need to remedy their ills before turning to the Negro slave; (2) the anti-slavery program was too restricted to draw the workingman into its ranks, for it did not consider the labor question as a whole; (3) many labor leaders held that the opposition to slavery was only a struggle between northern industrial and commercial capitalists on the one hand, and southern agricultural capitalists on the other—in either case the worker had little to gain.

As early as 1832 Seth Luther, one of the rising labor leaders, in an address to the workingmen of New England expressed his doubts that the northern mill worker was in a much better economic condition than the southern slave. Luther declared that through his visits to the South he knew it to be true "that children born in slavery do not work one half the hours, nor perform one quarter of the labour that the white children do in the cotton mills in free

New England.”<sup>1</sup> He challenged those who advocated freedom for the Negro slave to “show us the great advantage they possess over slave children.” To the contrary, Luther told the workers, slave children enjoyed many advantages which white factory children did not. His conclusion was that the workers should give all their time to improving their condition and leave Negro slavery alone.<sup>2</sup>

At a meeting of workers held at Charlestown, Massachusetts, in 1840, an address to the workers of the state was drawn up. It asserted the rights of the workers and examined the manner in which they were being deprived of those rights. On the issue of abolition the address urged caution since, it was stated, “there is less identity of interest between the capitalist and us, than there is between the master and the slave.”<sup>3</sup> The convention felt that primary interest should be given to the lot of the worker since “the same principle which would cause a man to take good care of his horses, or sheep would lead him to protect his slave.”<sup>4</sup> In a similar vein a worker’s tract of New York about the same time advised its readers to attend to their own condition before seeking to emancipate the southern slave. It was the contention of this labor paper that the basis for slavery was the poverty of the Negro, and in that respect the white workers of the North were as much slaves as the blacks in the South. In an issue of May, 1842, the workers were advised to look upon the anti-slavery movement with skeptical eyes.<sup>5</sup> Three arguments to support this contention were advanced: (1) that Negro slavery was not

<sup>1</sup> Seth Luther, *An Address to the Working Men of New England on the State of Education, and on the Condition of the Producing Classes in Europe and America* (Boston, 1832), p. 25.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* Appendix I, p. 37.

<sup>3</sup> *Third Grand Rally of Workingmen of Charlestown, Massachusetts*, October 23, 1840, p. 11.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> “The Slavery of Poverty,” *New York Quarterly Pamphleteer*, No. 1, May, 1842.

the worst form of slavery which existed in the United States; (2) that the abolitionists did not propose to free the Negro completely, for they advanced no method for giving him a livelihood after emancipating him; (3) that the enfranchisement and abolition of poverty among the white workers of the North should precede the freeing of the Negro.

Closely allied with the labor movement during the 1840's was the reformist movement. These reformers, who often took the workingmen under their wing, were rather lukewarm in their attitude toward the anti-slavery cause and were influential in converting leaders and workers to their point of view. The reform element in the labor movement was made up of the Associationists, Co-operationists, Agrarians, and Land Reformers.<sup>6</sup> They generally felt that the northern worker needed to learn that the southern slave was not always in a worse state than he, and that he needed to embrace the whole labor movement, and not one portion, as did the abolitionists. It was not that the reformers were hostile to emancipation, for many gave it support. It was rather that they differed on the question of expediency and policy. In their newspapers and in those of the straight labor organizations they expounded this idea. In the Industrial Congresses<sup>7</sup> of the forties and fifties the same attitude was proclaimed by them and other labor leaders.

The *Working Man's Advocate*<sup>8</sup>, the official organ of the National Reform Association<sup>9</sup> which was organized in 1844, kept before the workers the relationship between their lot and the anti-slavery movement. This organ was none too friendly at times toward the appeals of the abolitionists to

<sup>6</sup> On the reformers see John R. Commons, *History of Labour in the United States*, (New York, 1918), Vol. I—Part IV, "Humanitarianism (1840-1860)" by Henry E. Hoagland, p. 487 *et. seq.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 547-58.

<sup>8</sup> The title of this paper was changed to *Young America* in 1845.

<sup>9</sup> Commons, *op. cit.*, chapter v.

artisans and mill workers for support. On one occasion the opinion was expressed that, though the slaves of the South were driven by the lash, they were provided with the necessities of life, while the northern worker was at the hands of his master, the capitalist, who, "has a lash more potent than the whiphong to stimulate the energies of his white slaves: the fear of want."<sup>10</sup>

At another time a correspondent of this workers' paper in an open letter to Feargus O'Connor, the English Chartist leader, tried to explain for British readers the attitude of many American workers toward the anti-slavery movement. The writer maintained that it was a gross error to believe that the black slaves in the southern states were more enslaved than were the operatives in the North. It was admitted that the Negro was held in bondage, but his chains could be seen by all. In contrast, "the white slave—the operative—is a different being and requires different treatment. Instead of simple chains he wears a net that hampers every fibre of his body and every faculty of his soul. . . ."<sup>11</sup>

On other occasions, writers went to great lengths to compare the apparent benefits of slavery in the South with the hardships facing the free laborers in the North. On the basis of such comparisons it was reasoned that the northern workers should give little attention to abolitionism and concentrate on their own situation. The *Working Man's Advocate* editorialized that while the laws of southern states required the master to support his slaves when they were too old for active labor, the northern mill worker had no such security. It was asked, "Is there any law in the North requiring those who receive the benefit of the poor man's labor to support him when he is past his labor?"<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> *Working Man's Advocate*, March 16, 1844.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, June 22, 1844.

<sup>12</sup> October 5, 1844.

It was felt that the liberty of the white worker was only such liberty as the employer chose to extend to him: "Our laborers may work as the capitalists dictate, or not, but if they do not they must starve." Such conditions needed to be remedied before the workers could be expected to concern themselves with abolitionism.

One would have imagined that the southern slave had an ideal life if the contrasts between his existence and that of the northern worker could have been accepted. One writer of the period, who appealed to the workers to be cautious in adopting the anti-slavery program, held that the slave could depend upon his master who would be interested in his welfare, and that the slave was safe in the knowledge that, "whether he work or play, be young or old, sick or well, the master is bound to feed, clothe and shelter him to the latest period of his existence."<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, the northern worker was pictured as not being able to get a master who cared for him, and was forced, therefore, to sell his labor by the day to any employer who would hire him.

This same writer expressed the opinion that the free labor system of the North gave all advantage to the employer since he had no initial expenditure for his laborers, and in case of sickness he bore no part of the cost of caring for the ill worker as did the slave owner. The employer was pictured as being able at any moment to "abandon his victim, and consign him to everlasting poverty and wretchedness, though he devoted the best days of his life to the service of his master."

In their desire to have the northern workers remain aloof from the anti-slavery struggle, some of those interested in organized labor pictured the lot of the slave in such glowing terms that it would seem that they were pro-

<sup>13</sup> John Pickering—*The Working Man's Political Economy* (New York, 1847), pp. 4-5.

slavery. One writer pictured the slaves as leading an easy life: "Their work is light and regular, as a general rule. They have abundant time for recreation and for holidays. They are not, like free laborers, forced to beg or suffer for want of work to do. They are not tempted to strike for higher wages, when the ordinary rates are too low for the necessaries of life. . . . They are not set adrift amongst dens of infamy and pollution which contaminate free cities, bidding defiance to the hands of the police and the hearts of the benevolent."<sup>14</sup> Contrasted with this favorable view of slavery was the picture of the white worker in his state of freedom. While the slave master had the welfare of his slave at heart, it was asked, "where is the heart or sympathy between the money capitalist and his operatives?"<sup>15</sup> Such invidious comparisons led one journal to inquire, "how much better, then, we ask, is the condition of some of our white laborers than some of our black southern slaves?"<sup>16</sup>

This tendency to present slavery in a favorable light while presenting the lot of the white workingman of the North in most repelling aspects was a constant theme of labor literature of the day, and was offered as proof that the workers should steer clear of abolitionism. A few samples can be given to illustrate fully the technique.

In an attack upon abolitionist appeals to northern workers one writer after stressing the beneficence of "the southern capitalists", inveighed against "those Shylocks in the Free States" who did not care "how many families they may ruin, so long as they can realize a fortune out of their blood and bones. . . ."<sup>17</sup> Factory owners were often referred to as "white slave-drivers" who took advantage of the use

<sup>14</sup> John H. Hopkins, *The American Citizen: His Rights and Duties According to the Constitution of the United States*, (New York, 1857), p. 132.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 133-134.

<sup>16</sup> *Working Man's Advocate*, October 5, 1844.

<sup>17</sup> H. B. Mullins, *A Voice from the Workshop* (New York, 1860), pp. 10-11.



of machinery to pile up huge stocks of surpluses so that they could resist the just demands of their workers.<sup>18</sup> At another time they were denounced as tyrants, who forced their workers into labor conditions which were "monotonous, excessive and ill paid" so that the Negro slave enjoyed a better status than did the white worker.<sup>19</sup>

The workingman saw in verse his plight compared unfavorably with that of the slave. In 1847, publicity was given to a bit of verse in which the usual comparison was made:

O cruel, most cruel, the laborer sigh'd,  
The fate of the African slave,  
Who crouches in silence, his master beside,  
From infancy to his grave.  
But though he is fetter'd and forced to resign  
His right to the pleasures of the earth,  
The state of that captive is nobler than mine,  
For want never visits his hearth.<sup>20</sup>

The poem continued in the usual melancholy strain of the verse of that day to picture the starving wife and children of the northern operative, whereas in the South the slave had perfect security.

Women who worked in northern factories were pictured as suffering far more than did the slave women in the fields of the South. The factory girls were pointed to as another instance of "wages slavery versus chattel slavery."<sup>21</sup> One reformist paper held that the whip of economic necessity which forced young women to work in New England textile mills was little different from the lash of the slavemaster. To the editors this seemed to be "slavery, quite as real as any in Turkey or Carolina."<sup>22</sup>

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>19</sup> *Niles Register*, May, 1845.

<sup>20</sup> Pickering, *op. cit.*, p. 202.

<sup>21</sup> See the *Liberator*, August 28, 1846. Article by William West.

<sup>22</sup> *The Harbinger*, August 30, 1845. This paper, which started as the *Phalanx*, in 1843, was the official paper of the Associationists. See Commons, *op. cit.*, p. 501.

The letters of labor leaders and reformers reflected their skepticism of the anti-slavery movement. Not only did some of them feel that the position of the free white laboring man in the North needed improvement before the problem of Negro slavery was attacked, but many believed that the latter institution could never be destroyed until the white worker had gained his ends. In 1846, William West, leader of the National Reform Association, publicly stated that the time had passed when he considered the blacks in the South to be the most degraded of men in the country. He had come to the conclusion that "there are other slaves, wages slaves, infinitely more oppressed, degraded, and hopeless."<sup>23</sup> He declared the supposed freedom of the worker to be a fiction, saying that, "their boasted freedom is but a name."

George Evans, another well-known reformer and economist, gave as the reason for his apathy toward the anti-slavery cause his realization that "there was white slavery."<sup>24</sup> At a later date Evans expressed it as his opinion in a letter to the abolitionist, Gerrit Smith, that "there is more real suffering among the landless whites of the north, than among the blacks of the south. . ."<sup>25</sup> Evans was a land reformer, holding that the public lands should be given freely to all of the people. He believed that if the slaves were emancipated they should be settled on lands in some distant part of the country. In his reply to Evans, Smith asserted that labor leaders and labor newspapers were generally opposed to freeing the slaves.<sup>26</sup>

Orestes A. Brownson, one of the leading reformers of the pre-Civil War period, was connected with the labor movement constantly after 1829.<sup>27</sup> He felt, also, that the slavery

<sup>23</sup> *Liberator*, August 28, 1846.

<sup>24</sup> *Working Man's Advocate*, July 6, 1844.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, July 24, 1844.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, July 20, 1844.

<sup>27</sup> Common's *op. cit.*, pp. 494-496.

of wages was more destructive than that of person.<sup>28</sup> As far as he was concerned, physically considered, "the negro slaves are in a better condition than any other class of simple laborers in the country." Through his *Quarterly Review* he exerted a wide influence among eastern Catholics. In a similar vein the noted Thomas Ingersoll challenged Garrison to prove that the slave was in a more degraded position than the northern workers. He could "find little to choose between the slavery of wages and that of no wage; though the salvery of wages supposes, and indeed is proof, of the mental advance of this order of slaves, over him who is yet but a chattel."<sup>29</sup> In this same light Henry C. Carey, the political economist, compared the laboring classes in the North and the South without finding much to choose between them. He saw "palaces rise in New York and Philadelphia, while droves of black slaves are sent to Texas to raise cotton, and white ones at the North perish of disease, and sometimes almost of famine."<sup>30</sup> While these leaders were seldom openly hostile to the anti-slavery cause, their indifference certainly did not popularize it among those workers who sympathized with whatever programs they were advancing.

The chief charge against the abolitionists was that their program was too narrow. The National Industrial Congress, meeting in New York, in October, 1845, while expressing sympathy for the anti-slavery cause, sought to assign reasons for its lack of popularity among the working classes. Among the resolutions adopted was one saying, "The Abolition movement, sincere, ardent, heroic with attacks upon chattel slavery, has not succeeded, because those engaged in it have not perceived that it was only one of the many modes of oppression that productive labor has to en-

<sup>28</sup> *Brownson's Quarterly Review*, vol. ii (3d Series) October, 1854.

<sup>29</sup> *Liberator*, March 26, 1847.

<sup>30</sup> Henry C. Carey, *The Slave Trade, Domestic and Foreign* (Philadelphia, 1856), p. 368.

dure, which everywhere condemn him to ignorance and want.’<sup>31</sup> The same charge was levelled against Garrison, who was adversely criticized because “his devotion to the blacks in bondage has closed his eyes to the bondage of the whites.”<sup>32</sup>

In 1847 the radical wing of the Democratic party of New York held a meeting at Herkimer, from whence an appeal was made to the masses to support their program of opposition to slave labor. *The Harbinger* expressed some doubt of the sincerity of this move, for the party, when referring to “free labor” meant “freedom from black servitude, not white emancipation.”<sup>33</sup> The charge was made that, “though seven-tenths of our laboring population at the North are in a worse condition than the slaves at the south; though as our statistics show, an extreme poverty is rapidly increasing in very state; though vice and crime, growing out of selfish social arrangements, are multiplying in a prodigious ratio; though the condition of our larger towns in their fearful contrasts of excessive wealth and squalid pauperism are fast approximating the rotten and festering human lives of the old world—it all passes for nothing with these sudden sympathies with the negro.”<sup>34</sup> The abolitionists were called upon to awaken from their mistaken policy and broaden their program to include better conditions for northern workers, and then the workers would join their movement.

These reaction to the anti-slavery movement indicate a skepticism and a certain indifference, but not a hostility. However, some labor leaders and their followers exhibited an active hostility to the abolitionists and sought to impede their progress whenever possible.

<sup>31</sup> *The Harbinger*, October 4, 1845.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, July 18, 1846.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, November 13, 1847.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

*Hostility to the Anti-Slavery Movement*

The extent to which the workers of the North were actively hostile to the anti-slavery cause is not easy to determine. It is probably true that the workers were not sympathetic toward slavery, whatever their attitude toward the anti-slavery crusade may have been. The institution of slavery found little active and positive support among the urban workers, even though they were not always ready to lend a hand to overthrow the institution. We may agree with William West, when in 1846 he wrote of the northern factory operatives: "They do not hate chattel slavery less, but they hate wages slavery more."<sup>35</sup>

There is evidence that while the majority of labor leaders and workers were skeptical of the appeals of the anti-slavery groups to join their crusade, an active minority was opposed to abolitionism and sought to drive it out of those communities where it had begun to gain a following.

Hostility of many workers toward the anti-slavery doctrines was probably a part of their dislike for the free Negroes who lived among them and offered labor competition. Especially was this true of some of the working-class Irish and German immigrants.<sup>36</sup> When the mechanics and laborers joined mobs seeking to drive out anti-slavery agitators they were not always the most important elements of these lawless groups. The abolition press and writers admitted this to be true. When Garrison was attacked by a mob in Boston in 1835, the *Liberator* maintained that the mob was not made up of "the workingmen, but of 'gentlemen of property and standing from all parts of the city'."<sup>37</sup>

In the next year the Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Society, in condemning mob violence asserted that, "the meetings for putting down Abolitionists in our principal towns and

<sup>35</sup> *Liberator*, September 25, 1846.

<sup>36</sup> Carter G. Woodson, *The Negro in Our History* (Washington, 1931), p. 326 *et. seq.*

<sup>37</sup> November 7, 1835.

cities, have all been invited and attended by the same class—the Aristocracy. The ‘bone and muscle’ of the community—the hardy farmers and the busy intelligent mechanics have neither invited them, nor been invited to them.’<sup>38</sup> Wendell Phillips concurred in this idea when he said that, “well-dressed men hire hungry mechanics to mob free speech.”<sup>39</sup> Of many it was true, as Professor Theodore Smith has said, they knew anti-slavery advocates “merely as unpopular persons, and therefore as fair marks for rotten eggs and decayed vegetables.”<sup>40</sup>

Even though northern mobs against abolitionists were not composed always of working-class people, there is evidence that many of this group and their leaders were openly hostile to abolitionism. Two factors bred this hostility. First, there was the belief that emancipation would induce migration of Negroes to the North and thus increase labor competition. In the second place, some workers were moved to assume a hostile attitude toward abolition because of the same fear which induced some of their employers to exhibit the same reaction—the fear that anti-slavery doctrines would disturb commercial relations with the South. Several instances of this active hostility of labor will be helpful to illustrate these points.

In 1836 when James G. Birney attempted to establish his anti-slavery paper, *The Philanthropist*, in Cincinnati he met with violent mob violence.<sup>41</sup> A large part of the trade of this growing metropolis was with the South and fear was expressed that Birney’s press would disturb these profitable commercial relations. Among those in the city

<sup>38</sup> *Proceedings of the Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Convention* (Providence, R. I., 1836).

<sup>39</sup> Wendell Phillips, *Speeches, Letters and Papers*, 1st Series (Boston, 1892), p. 324.

<sup>40</sup> Theodore C. Smith, *The Liberty and Free Soil Parties in the Northwest*, (New York, 1897), p. 66.

<sup>41</sup> Woodson, *op. cit.*, pp. 320-321.

most opposed to Birney's proposal were, "the artizans, who are employed in manufacturing household furniture, or steam boat, sugar house, or other heavy machinery for the South."<sup>42</sup> To prevent Birney and his associates from setting up their press meetings were held in the city on July 23, 1836. The time of the largest mass-meeting for those interested was fixed "when most of those who labor in the foundries and shipyards, and elsewhere, would be discharged from labor for the week, and at a place convenient for their assembly."<sup>43</sup>

Fear of labor competition, which would result from an influx of Negroes if the ends of the abolitionists were achieved, led a group of workers to petition the legislature of Connecticut to control the labor of free Negroes in the state and to stop the activities of the abolitionists. The abolitionists were stigmatized as being "certain zealots" whose purpose was "to sow the seeds of insurrection and civil commotion in the nation, and to force the degraded black into society, and acquire for him equal civil and political privileges with ourselves."<sup>44</sup> The memorialists charged that whenever the Negro came into competition with the white worker the latter "is deprived of employment, or is forced to labor for less than he requires." Fugitive and emancipated slaves from the South, it was said, were yearly pouring into the state and as a result white labor was being driven out by the influx of "black porters, black truckmen, black sawyers, black mechanics, and black laborers of very description."<sup>45</sup>

Fear of labor competition from the Negroes led some of the friends of labor to denounce the anti-slavery movement. One such critic of abolitionism advised workers to shun the

<sup>42</sup> *Narrative of the Late Riotous Proceedings Against the Liberty of the Press in Cincinnati* (Cincinnati, 1836), p. 10.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>44</sup> *Liberator*, February 15, 1834.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

movement "because an influx of free negroes from the south, would have a most pernicious and disastrous influence upon the honest, industrious and virtuous poor, residing out of the confines of the now slave-holding states. Those blacks, finding that they must work or starve, would, in order to get employment, work for lower wages than the white man received, who would be thrown out of employment."<sup>46</sup> This fear of labor competition in event of emancipation led the political economist, George Evans, to inquire: "Is it not probable that some of it would find its way to the North, where there is already so great a surplus that the workingmen are frequently striking against a reduction in wages? The condition of the laboring classes everywhere would be made worse by such a change."<sup>47</sup> Evans felt that the workingmen should try to stop the progress of the anti-slavery movement in the North in order to protect their own interests.

The working classes of New York City were warned by one of the dailies of that place that the success of the abolitionists "would create inevitably a pinching competition between black labor and white labor and contaminate the industrious and laboring classes of the North by a revolting admixture of the black element."<sup>48</sup>

This imagined fear of probable labor competition was one of the most difficult obstacles which the anti-slavery forces had to contend with when they appealed to the working classes of the North.<sup>49</sup> And their lot was made more difficult as their opponents were able to bring evidences of

<sup>46</sup> Leander Ker, *Slavery Consistent With Christianity*, (Jefferson City, Mo., 1842), p. 24.

<sup>47</sup> *Workingman's Advocate*, July 24, 1844.

<sup>48</sup> *New York Globe*, November 1, 1845.

<sup>49</sup> As an illustration of the dilemma of the anti-slavery leaders in this connection see the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, June 20, 1850, for a speech by William E. Channing before the New England Anti-Slavery Convention of May 30, 1850.



the ruinous competition which slaves and free Negroes in the South offered the white mechanics there.<sup>50</sup>

A workers' convention held in Washington in 1850 denounced the abolitionists as "men who divert you from the protection of your rights and interests, by occupying your attention upon the condition of the colored men while they enslave the whites."<sup>51</sup> And a labor paper advocated that laws should be passed to silence the anti-slavery leaders so that "they should, if possible, be prevented from making more converts to their erroneous doctrines."<sup>52</sup>

These evidences of open hostility of workers in their conventions and of their leaders to the anti-slavery movement are not numerous enough to warrant any conclusion that such sentiments characterized a majority of the laboring classes. Even the neutrality and indifference of many of the working classes toward abolitionism were often counteracted by different sentiments among the working classes of the North. There were many who were sympathetic toward the cause of emancipation. The workers, the anti-slavery forces, and northern politicians very promptly took up the challenge of those who asserted that low wages of mill operatives were as bad as chattel slavery of the South. A large number of the workers and their leaders perceived the cogency of the arguments of the necessity for the working classes to align with those who fought the enslavement of the blacks. Especially was this true as the North, as a whole, became more sympathetic toward the doctrines of anti-slavery.

<sup>50</sup> There were many interesting cases of competition of Negro labor displacing white mechanics in the South. These were faithfully reported in the anti-slavery press. For such see the *National Era* for November 8, 1849 when white mechanics at Petersburg, Virginia protested against competition from slaves. Also in the same paper for July 24, 1851, an instance at Portsmouth, Virginia. From Georgia a similar instance was reported in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, July 31, 1851.

<sup>51</sup> *Address to the Workingmen of the United States*, (Washington, 1840), p. 11.

<sup>52</sup> *Young America* (N. Y.) quoted by the *Liberator*, September 4, 1846.

*Support for the Abolitionist Cause*

The anti-slavery movement received the avowed support of many of those, called leaders of the workers' movement and of the working classes. It is to be assumed that many workers supported the movement through their activities in churches and like groups in which abolitionism was popular in the North. The issue here is to discover the extent to which abolitionism held an ideological appeal for groups of northern workers and to point to evidences of active sympathy and support by the workers and their leaders.

Writing some time after the Civil War one author was led to say that the anti-slavery movement was "far stronger for a time in the factories and shoe-shops than in the pulpits or colleges."<sup>53</sup> This is an exaggeration of the situation, but it does have some basis in fact.

Early in the period of militant anti-slavery a leading labor paper hailed the movement as, "establishing principles and precedents for the use of all oppressed laborers without distinction of color."<sup>54</sup> Contrary to the ideas of many interested in the working classes, this paper felt that if slavery were abolished then would follow into discard "the lighter burdens that press upon the free," and, therefore, the workers were called upon to espouse "the cause of their more sorely oppressed brethren of the South." The same paper was reported as calling upon the anti-slavery leaders to publicize their movement among the northern workingmen who, as the paper stated, "are destined to slavery if the abolitionists are overthrown."<sup>55</sup>

There were frequent reports of the interest of groups of workers in the cause of abolition. In 1837 it was reported that factory workers in and about Lynn, Massachusetts, had

<sup>53</sup> Thomas W. Higginson, *Cheerful Yesterdays*, (New York, 1898), p. 115.

<sup>54</sup> *Liberator*, February 4, 1837, Quoting *The Friend of Man*.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, March 31, 1837, Quoting *The Friend of Man*.

formed an anti-slavery society.<sup>56</sup> An English traveler to the United States asserted that the factory workers of the North were recruits for the antislavery societies. After visiting Lowell, Massachusetts, he recorded that "many hundreds of the factory girls were members of the Anti-slavery Society."<sup>57</sup>

As the opposition to slavery became more vocal in the North there was evidence of an increasing tendency for labor papers and labor representatives to express open support for abolitionism.<sup>58</sup> In 1845 *The Harbinger* was ready to admit that, "the time has now come for the entire eradication of Slavery and Servitude, and the formal extermination of this hideous ulcer which is still as it ever has been, preying upon the vitals of humanity."<sup>59</sup> And later the same paper, in speaking of the abolitionists, declared that "brave and warm hearts are stirred by their appeals."<sup>60</sup> Another paper interested in the cause of labor in calling upon the working classes to rally to the support of the abolitionists castigated slavery in these words:

"...Every succeeding day only renders this question of slavery more vexing. Its ugly face peers up to view from every cranny and dog-hole into which it is attempted to hide it. There is now but one issue. Either slavery must have full liberty and sweep to expand itself in infinity or else it must meet in fell encounter with death. You cannot touch a single question of general policy in which slavery does not get some moral thrust. It cannot be avoided. Slavery must be extinguished. If the question of cheap postage

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, March 18, 1837.

<sup>57</sup> Joseph Sturge, *A Visit to the United States in 1841*, (London, 1842), p. 143. Probably propaganda was the statement made at the fourth annual convention of the American Anti-Slavery Society in May, 1837, to the effect that in the 1,000 new local societies formed was embraced a "multitude of the yeomanry and mechanics—the free laborers of the North." The convention waxed more lyrical than accurate when it declared that "the free-independent—hard-working yeomanry and mechanics of the North have decreed that, by the blessing of God, slavery in this republic shall have a speedy end." See, *Liberator*, May 12, 1837.

<sup>58</sup> George McNeill, *The Labor Movement*, (New York, 1887), p. 122.

<sup>59</sup> June 18, 1845.

<sup>60</sup> October 4, 1845.

comes up, it is alleged that the peculiar institutions of the South render such a reform impracticable. Whether the question be of free trade, direct taxation, internal improvements—or of peace as a national policy—whether it be conquering or annexing territory or of organizing territorial governments—or whether it be of freeing the soil to actual settlers and limiting the quantity any man may acquire—whatever may be the question . . . this enormous dragon has something at stake. We go for direct and internecine war with the monster.”<sup>61</sup>

In July, 1845, a call was issued by the National Reform Association and the New England Workingman’s Association for a general convention to meet in New York to discuss the problems of northern workers and to lay plans for a new general labor movement. Though the Associationists, who were reformers rather than labor leaders, exercised much influence in the convention, the labor element was always an important factor.<sup>62</sup> In the call for the New York meeting, L. W. Ryckman, president of the New England Workingman’s Association, stated that one of the purposes of the meeting was to “abolish slavery,” though the reformist influence was seen in that the solution for the abolition of slavery was to be free public lands.<sup>63</sup>

At a meeting which was preliminary to the larger meeting of the Industrial Congress, the secretary of the National Reform Association had declared for freedom of the public lands for “the slaves of wages and all other slaves forever.”<sup>64</sup> When the general convention met the agenda included the issue of Negro slavery, though it does not seem that any very extended discussion on this subject took place.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>61</sup> Norman Ware, *The Industrial Worker, 1840-1860*, (Boston, 1924), p. 235, quoting *Voice of Industry*, July 27, 1848.

<sup>62</sup> Commons, *op. cit.*, p. 547.

<sup>63</sup> *Liberator*, July 4, 1845, *The Harbinger*, June 21, 1845. Significant in this connection was an article by Arthur Brisbane, a leader of the Associationists, in which he committed his group to an anti-slavery platform. See the *Liberator*, August 1, 1845.

<sup>64</sup> Ware, *op. cit.*, p. 215. Quoting, *Voice of Industry*, July 31, 1845.

<sup>65</sup> Commons, *op. cit.*, pp. 549-550.

The prominence given to slavery with the opening of the war with Mexico aroused northerners to a new awareness of the implications of slavery. When the New England Working-Men's Convention met at Lynn, Massachusetts, on January 16, 1846, it was faced with the burning issue of slavery in the territories and the probabilities of war with Mexico. The convention went on record as opposing war with England over Oregon, or with Mexico. Sympathy was expressed for the "three million of our brethren and sisters groaning in chains on Southern plantations. . . ." <sup>66</sup> In opposing war, the convention declared, "We will never take up arms to sustain the Southern slaveholder in robbing one-fifth of our countrymen of their liberty." <sup>67</sup> The convention called upon northern workers "to speak out in thunder tones . . . and let it no longer be said, that Northern laborers, while they are endeavoring to gain their own rights, are nothing but a standing army that keeps three millions of their brethren and sisters in bondage at the point of the bayonet." However, there were discordant voices at the convention. One of the representatives of labor objected to giving attention to abolition for fear that it might weaken the general cause of white labor in the North. <sup>68</sup>

That these resolutions against slavery represented no hasty and temporary action was evident when the New England Working-Men's Association met in a second convention at Boston on May 27, 1846. The meeting lasted for three days; finally adjourned to meet again at Nashua, New Hampshire, in September. <sup>69</sup> The representatives at the convention opposed the war with Mexico and entered their protest "against having any part or lot in the matter, having no lives to lose or money to squander in such an unholy

<sup>66</sup> *Liberator*, February 20, 1846.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> Ware, *op. cit.*, p. 218.

<sup>69</sup> *Liberator*, June 12, 1846.

and unprofitable cause, to enhance the price of 'Texas Scrip,' and plunder Mexican soil for United States officers, Slaveholders and speculators to convert into a mart for traffic in human blood and human rights."<sup>70</sup>

The increased interest in the fight against slavery was exhibited by groups of workers throughout the decade of the 'forties. At a meeting of workers in Syracuse, New York, in June, 1846, slavery and the Mexican War were condemned by the assembled delegates. The war was denounced as a plan to extend the area for slavery and workers were called upon to divorce themselves from the attempt.<sup>71</sup> At the Boston Convention of the New England Labor Reform League,<sup>72</sup> which met in January, 1847, a unanimously adopted resolution stated that "American slavery must be uprooted before the elevation sought by the laboring classes can be effected."<sup>73</sup> Somewhat the same idea was expressed at the Industrial Congress of 1847 which met in New York.<sup>74</sup> And in 1848 wage earners met and expressed their approbation of the anti-slavery cause. This time it was a mass meeting of workingmen in Faneuil Hall of Boston. The meeting was called to celebrate the success of the French workers in the Revolution of 1848. While happy to observe the progress of labor in France the workers voiced their opposition to "the despotic attitude of the Slave Power at the South, and the domineering ascendancy of the Monied Oligarchy in the North."<sup>75</sup> The meet-

<sup>70</sup> *New York Tribune*, June 9, 1846.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> The New England Labor Reform League was an outgrowth of the New England Workingmen's Association. Ware states: "The leadership of the labor movement in New England has slipped into the hands of philanthropists such as Amasa Walker, Reverend Burton, William A. White, and Dr. Channing. The Convention wound up as a Free-Soil and Anti-Slavery affair." Ware, *op. cit.*, pp. 220-221.

<sup>73</sup> Ware, *op. cit.*, p. 221. Quoting the *Voice of Industry*, February 9, 1847.

<sup>74</sup> *Niles National Register*, July 10, 1847.

<sup>75</sup> *Liberator*, May 26, 1848. See also, McNeil, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

ing was in favor of "the destruction of white and black slavery."

As political parties opposed to slavery were organized many workers gave them their support. One labor paper termed the old political parties, "the instruments of the slave power."<sup>76</sup> With the rise of the Republican party many eastern workers found a rallying point.<sup>77</sup>

Though immigrant German workers were at first rather indifferent toward the anti-slavery movement, after the introduction of the Kansas-Nebraska Act those in New York City began to fall in line. On March 1, 1854, a German workingmen's society, the Arbeiterbund, held a public meeting in the city at which time they declared it to be their feeling that they should "protest most emphatically against both white and black slavery."<sup>78</sup> These workers branded anyone who supported the Kansas-Nebraska measure, "a traitor against the people and their welfare."

In the final equation of the attitude of the working classes of the North toward the anti-slavery movement and toward the efforts of the leaders of that movement to gain their support two reactions stand out. Some of the workers, their leaders, and their journals were indifferent toward the abolition movement—an attitude which sometimes bordered on active hostility. Other segments of the working classes were openly sympathetic to abolitionism and gave support to the movement. Where there was apathy or even some degree of hostility toward the anti-slavery cause three reasons can be discerned: (1) Many felt that the problems affecting northern labor were more immediate than the lot of the Negro slave and needed remedying first. (2) There was the belief that the anti-slavery leaders had little interest in the problems of northern workers and would do little to aid

<sup>76</sup> *The Laborer*, November 25, 1852.

<sup>77</sup> Commons, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

<sup>78</sup> Herman Schluter, *Lincoln, Labor and Slavery*, (New York, 1913), p. 76.

them. (3) If Negro slavery were abolished some of the working classes and their leaders feared that the blacks would flock to the North and offer labor competition.

As the opposition to slavery became more intense in the North evidence indicates that labor leaders and labor papers gave increasing support to the anti-slavery cause. There was a realization that the oppressing of the Negro slave in the South was a part of the trials of labor. More often did the labor papers stress the need to fight oppression of labor, whether it was of black slave labor, or white factory workers. When the Civil War split the country the northern working classes gave the government their loyal support.

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