

Lincoln and the Working Class

By JAY LOVESTONE

OF ALL our presidents to date Lincoln has been the one most entangled in a maze of mythical traditions.

At this moment when a strike-breaker is at the head of the government and when the country is in the midst of the unfolding of the worst tale of plunder in its odious annals of the looting of its wealth by the capitalists, it was not our task to unravel these mythical mysteries. A few words about Lincoln's relationship with the working class in the struggle to abolish chattel slavery in the United States will be appropriate.

All ideals, social attitudes, political and economic rights, take root in the material conditions at hand and transmitted. In these material conditions the economic conditions are the dynamic force, the changing influence. Lincoln spoke and reflected the ideals of the lower middle class who with the farmers made up the decisive majority of the population of the United States in 1860. It was in this role that Lincoln was at the helm in the fight against cotton culture.

The weakness and the wavering of this social class, in so far as they manifested themselves in Lincoln, counteracted by the strengthening influences of the working class and the enslaved class of Negroes. In the story of the Civil War the part played by these factors cannot be over-estimated. We recall how Frederick Douglass, the Negro advisor to Lincoln, sized up the early phases against chattel slavery in these words: "I reproached the North that they fought with one hand, while they might strike more effectively with two; that they fought with the soft white hand, while they kept the

black iron hand chained and helpless behind him; that they fought the effect while they protected that cause; and said that the Union cause would never prosper until the war assumed an anti-slavery attitude and the Negro was enlisted on the side of the Union."

Lincoln was very well aware of the fact that the heart of the English popular sentiment for the North was the working class of England. Lincoln called the conduct and the attitude of the suffering textile workers of Manchester towards the North whose blockade of the Southern ports was responsible for the shutting down of the British mills "an act of sublime Christian heroism which has not been surpassed in any age or any country."

Charles Francis Adams then in charge of the American legation in London replying for Lincoln to the address of the General Council of the International Workingmen's Association of which Karl Marx was at the head declared: "They (the United States) derived new encouragement to preserve from the testimony of the workmen of Europe."

The United States would never have been able to pull thru the revolutionary crisis of the Civil War if the workmen of Europe had not rallied whole heartedly to the fight against Negro slavery, tho the immediate economic advantages dictated them to favor the Southern cotton barons.

It was only the heavy hand of the International Workingmen's Association that stopped the British capitalists and their government from lining up with the South in order to have the South independent with tariff regulations of its own enabling

England to have "undisputed free trade." Famine fever, as Marx called the hunger typhus, starvation, wage cuts, jails, and poor houses were the lot of the English workmen who did so much to make possible Lincoln's victory over chattel slavery. The suffering of the English workmen was so deplorable that committees were formed in New York "for the purpose of collecting money for the starving weavers in the North of England and thus alleviating their misery."

This far-sightedness of Lincoln in appreciating the decisive importance of the working class in the struggle was crystallized in his address to the New York Republican Workingmen's Association in which he said: "None are so deeply interested to resist the present rebellion as the working people. Let them beware of prejudice, working division and hostility among themselves. The most notable feature of a disturbance in your city last summer was the hanging of some working people. It should never be so. The strongest bond of human sympathy outside of the family relation, should be the one uniting all working people of all nations, and tongues and kindreds."

The splendid international solidarity and sacrifices of the English working class in the Civil War and these memorable words of Lincoln take on redoubled significance for the American workers today. These heroic deeds and true words should remind our working men of their great need for solidarity at home against their common capitalist enemy and for international unity with the workers of the other countries in the fight against world imperialism and fascist reaction.