

# THE WORKING CLASS



Everybody knows this is the year of the Bi-Centennial. We could hardly forget. Every chamber of commerce is pushing a freedom train, or a freedom trail or a freedom ride. Shell Oil tells us how it was 200 years ago. Every politician is quick to remind us of our patriotic heritage and every businessman is quick to cash in on this patriotic sentiment by wrapping their products in the red, white, and blue.

But what gets forgotten in this orgy of phor patriotism and commercialism is what actually occurred 200 years ago. Those who hold power and mold opinion are anxious to slur over the fact that the US was created out of a war for national independence and a revolution. At a time when the US government stands against the tide of revolution and national liberation in the world, it is embarrassing to them, to say the least, to be reminded of the origins of the Republic.

But for the rest of us it is important to get at the real meaning of the American Revolution if the Bicentennial is going to be anything more than an overgrown Fourth of July picnic.

## ORIGINS OF THE US REVOLUTION

Prior to 1776 what was to become the US consisted of 13 colonies of Great Britain. Similar to colonies today, the relationship imposed on America by Great Britain was designed to divert the wealth produced in the colonies into the pockets of the British merchants, manufacturers and government agents. Imperial policy called for the strict regulation of trade, credit and manufacturing for the benefit of the "mother" country.

For Britain, America was both a source of raw materials and a market for British finished goods. The colonists were forced to sell their goods to British merchants at prices dictated by the British. The colonists were prohibited from manufacturing for the American market and were forced to buy British goods at high prices set by the British.

Naturally the British monopoly of the American market was unpopular in the colonies, particularly among the merchants, planters, and the small but growing class of manufacturers. These "men of property" wanted the right to trade with other foreign powers in order to secure better prices and profits. They wanted to develop the American market for commodities they themselves produced and sold.

For these reasons smuggling and illegal manufacturing were common occurrences. The British were forced to maintain a large administrative and military apparatus in the colonies to enforce their policies. To pay for this, the Crown instituted taxes on sugar, wine molasses and tea, passed the stamp act and forced the colonists to bear the expense of housing British troops. These measures oppressed the whole population by driving up taxes and prices of British imports.

## OPPRESSION WORSENS

British policy became more oppressive with each passing year. When the colonists fought back, they were met with ever greater repression. Traditional rights that colonists, along with other English subjects, had enjoyed were increasingly cast aside by a more dictatorial colonial administration. The prerogatives of colonial legislatures were taken over by the Crown and its agents. The military intervened more and more into civil affairs.

June-July '76, page 12

Trial by jury was supplanted by trial before British Admiralty courts. The British Army had informers everywhere; they arbitrarily invaded homes and arrested suspected violators of colonial policy. The Crown sought to establish the Church of England as a state Church, violating the religious and political sentiments of the large numbers of dissenters, many of whom had migrated to America precisely to escape such tyranny.

Thus British economic policy and the political restrictions that inevitably came with it affected the majority of the colonial population. While it was the propertied merchants and planters who stood to gain the most from severing the ties with England, the mass of small farmers and urban townspeople were also oppressed by colonial policy, and were thus ready to unite in a struggle for independence.

## CLASS DIVISIONS IN THE REVOLUTION

But at the same time the popular masses had contradictory interests with the merchants and planters. They not only resented British rule, they resented the rule of wealth and property here at home. Colonial society was anything but democratic. In Philadelphia, for example, nine tenths of the adult, white, male population was unable to vote because of property or religious restrictions on the franchise (right to vote).

Imprisonment for debt was common. Women were the victims of feudal custom and law with arranged marriages, virtually no right to obtain a divorce and restricted rights to own property and leave an inheritance. And most significantly, 20% of the population, 550,000 Black people, were chattel slaves with no legal rights while 50,000 other "freedmen" had only very limited rights.

The struggles of the masses for an end to these feudal strictures on American society and for the extension of democracy gave the war for independence a revolutionary social character.

## RULING CLASS FEARS MASSES

The wealthy planters and merchants regarded the masses with contradictory feelings: on the one hand they needed their support if the bond with Britain was to be broken. On the other hand, the propertied naturally feared the propertyless. They sought to hold back the democratic, levelling tendencies of the revolutionary masses at every turn.

Some of the colonial bourgeoisie viewed the participation of "ordinary people" in the revolution as more dangerous than British domination. The following letter from Governor Wright of Georgia to his superiors in London demonstrates the attitudes of these Tories:

*"In this province we are more unhappily circumstanced than in any other for there are very few men of real abilities, gentlemen, or Men of Property. . . The Parochial Committee are a parcel of the lowest people, chiefly carpenters, shoemakers, blacksmiths, etc., with a Jew at their head; in the General Committee and Council of Safety, there are some better sort of men and some merchants and planters -- but many of the inferior class, and it is really terrible my Lord, that such people should be suffered to overturn the Civil Government."*

Within the revolutionary movement, the most conservative planters and merchants viewed the masses with fear and contempt and while fighting Britain kept a nervous eye over their shoulders at their own "less privileged" countrymen. Governor Mooris, one of their most cynical spokesmen, summed up their task in the following way:

*"The sheep, simple as they are, cannot be gulled as heretofore. In Short, there is no ruling them; and now. . . how to keep them down is the question."*

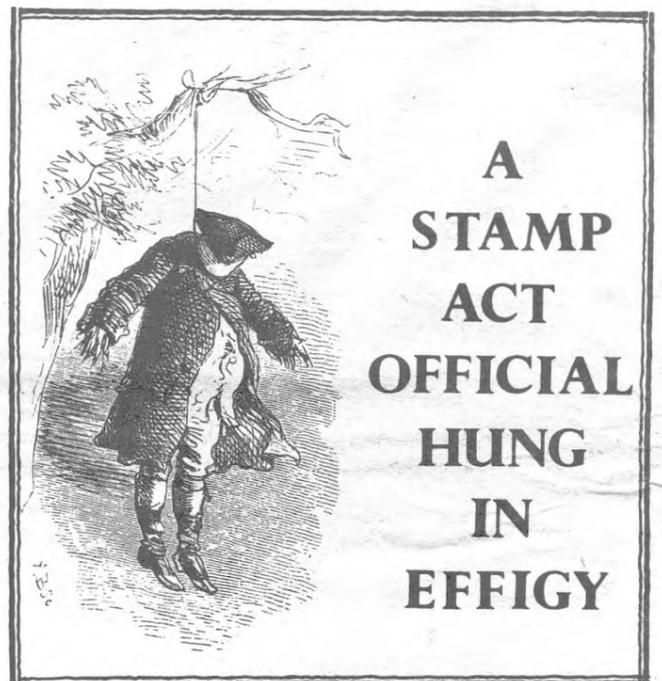
## POPULAR CHARACTER

The well-known leaders of the Revolution were for the most part men of property -- Washington the planter, Adams the lawyer, Hancock the merchant. But it was nameless mechanics and farmers who provided the base of the revolution and served as the engine driving it forward.

One of the first revolutionary organizations was the Sons of Neptune, based on the seamen of New York. The better known Sons of Liberty was predominantly made up of urban workers and artisans. The Daughters of Liberty was a militant revolutionary organization of women. These groups, at first secretly and later openly, organized resistance to colonial policy. During the agitation against the Stamp Act they organized militant demonstrations shutting down stamp act offices and driving British agents into hiding.

Workers directly resisted the British with political strikes as in the case of NY maritime workers who refused to unload British ships in 1768 or Boston Building tradesmen who struck against building British fortifications.

Students were active in the revolutionary ferment and took advanced positions on the questions of the day, calling for equality for women and the abolition of slavery. As in the 1960's, college administrators reacted with repression. When President Clap of Yale in 1765 responded to student unrest with fines and expulsions, the students broke the windows in his home and nearly the bones in his body. The following year a student-faculty strike drove him from office.



## BLACK PEOPLE AND THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

The main contradiction, the "tragic flaw" of the American Revolution was summed up by Abigail Adams, wife of John Adams and a far more consistent democrat than her husband, after the suppression of a slave plot in Boston:

*"It always appeared a most iniquitous scheme to me to fight ourselves for what we are daily robbing and plundering from those who have as good a right to freedom as we have."*

Black people during the American Revolution cared first and foremost about whether the Revolution would deliver on its promise of equality as stated in the Declaration of Independence. Over one hundred years of slavery had shaped the mentality of colonial American society along deeply white supremacist lines. The Revolution called into question the system of slavery and the doctrines of racism. A number of left wing spokespeople of the revolution were for abolition.

Tom Paine, in the first pamphlet he wrote for publication, "African Slavery in America," called not only for the end of slavery but for full personal liberty and land for the Black people as well. During the years of the Revolution, anti-slavery sentiment grew among whites and in many northern states slavery was abolished. But in the South slavery remained firmly entrenched and the shackles even tightened in the face of fears of slave rebellion and defection to the British.

The Continental Congress passed a resolution calling for the end to the slave trade, but the alliance with the pro-slavery planters meant the Congress was unwilling to take a position for emancipation. Jefferson's original draft of the Declaration of Independence had an anti-slavery section which was deleted after protests from Southern planters and New England slave traders.

# AND THE REVOLUTION



## 1776



Of course the good Lord's predictions were to be contradicted. Fighting a guerrilla-style campaign, the Americans waged a long, protracted war and defeated the mightiest military force in the world. The British never quite got it through their heads that the Americans might have the ability to defeat them. Lord Germain, like Westmoreland during the Vietnam war, made the following "light at the end of the tunnel" statement right before the final collapse of the British Army with the surrender of Cornwallis at Yorktown: "So vast is our superiority everywhere, that no resistance on their part is to be apprehended, that can materially obstruct the progress of the King's Army in the speedy suppression of the Rebellion."

Like the Vietnamese and Angolan revolutions, the revolutionary U.S. received important foreign military and diplomatic aid. The British viewed the revolution as the work of a fanatical handful stirred up by foreigners, similar to the view of U.S. authorities toward other revolutions today. The British, like today's talk of "Soviet-backed rebels," grossly exaggerated the importance of French aid to the rebels.

### THE ACHIEVEMENT OF THE REVOLUTION

The expulsion of the British and the achievement of independence was to have profound implications. As a sovereign state the U.S. was able to pursue economic policies beneficial to its own national development. The revolution unleashed the forces of capitalist development, although the survival of slavery greatly inhibited this. While today's monopoly capitalism is a bankrupt system whose burial is long overdue, at that time it represented an enormous advance over the stagnant feudal system which preceded it. Capitalism here as in Europe was to expand enormously society's productive forces and wealth.

The Revolution also represented a political advance. It proclaimed the idea of popular sovereignty -- the notion that all power is vested in the people. In spite of the fact that the Republic's practice was never to conform to this idea, the idea itself represented progress from medieval concepts of the divine right of kings and nobles to rule of the masses.

The society that emerged from the revolution was far more democratic than colonial America. The extension of the right to vote, the adoption of the Bill of Rights, the separation of church and state and the realization of any number of anti-feudal democratic reforms (abolition of primogeniture, imprisonment for debt, liberalized divorce laws, etc.) represented gains for democracy.

On the other hand, the democratic thrust of the Revolution was restricted by the planter-merchant alliance. The adoption of the Constitution with its emphasis on the rights of property and its commitment to maintaining slavery was a major defeat for the popular forces and represented a kind of counter-revolution.

### THE REVOLUTION TODAY

The democratic agenda of the U.S. Revolution of 1776 remains incomplete: Black people as well as other oppressed nationalities and women some two hundred years later have yet to gain full democratic rights. And today these rights are unobtainable within the framework of bourgeois rule and capitalism. Furthermore, the real democratic gains of '76 have been rendered increasingly meaningless and irrelevant by the development of capitalism and the rule of monopoly. Monopoly capitalism is a block to further social progress. It stands for economic exploitation, instability and war.

Today it is the task of the working class, the oppressed nationalities and all democratic forces to make a new revolution, a socialist revolution. Only a socialist revolution can complete the democratic agenda of '76 and make equality a reality, not just a word. Our revolutionary task today is to sweep aside the now obsolete capitalist system that was the product of the first revolution. This is the true meaning of the Bicentennial.

## The Boston Massacre, 1770 - CRISPUS ATTUCKS a Black man, was the first person killed in the struggle.

Given the revolution's failure to commit itself to ending slavery and winning equality, Black people were left between the Devil of the British and the Deep Blue Sea of a "democracy" that refused to recognize their claim to liberty and equality. Many slaves used the opportunities presented by the military situation to strike a blow for their freedom. Some escaped to join maroon colonies in Florida and elsewhere.

Other slaves responded to the British offer of freedom in exchange for rebellion against the planters. These slaves were rewarded more often than not with being killed or sold into slavery in the West Indies by the British.

Still other Black people joined in the revolutionary effort hoping that the revolution would advance the cause of abolition and equality. Over 5,000 Black people served in the Revolutionary army and from all contemporary reports were among the best and bravest soldiers. The portraits of the revolutionary war of course never show Black soldiers starving at Valley Forge or freezing while crossing the Delaware.

The lily-white mentality of our present day super-patriots is demonstrated by their failure to mention the role of Black people in the revolutionary struggle. Even more racist is their failure to see the obvious contradiction and hypocrisy of a revolution that declared that all men were equal while keeping 1 out of 5 of those same men in bondage.

### REVOLUTIONARY DEMOCRATIC DICTATORSHIP

Today the U.S. ruling class points to victorious socialist and anti-imperialist revolutions with horror because these communists have jailed or executed traitors and counter-revolutionaries. Yet the U.S. revolution was in no way any different in dealing with its domestic enemies. The Tories, or the pro-British elements in revolutionary America, were a definite minority. They were drawn for the most part from the wealthier sections of colonial society or elements who had been part of the British colonial apparatus.

The Tories' hatred for the patriotic and revolutionary cause knew no bounds. They referred to the patriots as "Beasts of the People, Sons of Darkness, and ungovernable, riotous, high-handed bandits and murderers." Naturally the Tories were eager to collaborate with the British and thus represented a danger to the revolutionary cause.

From the beginning the revolutionary forces dealt ruthlessly and harshly with these enemies. Adams summed up the patriot attitude toward Tories when he described them as "the most despicable animal in the creation; spiders, toads, snakes are their only proper emblem."

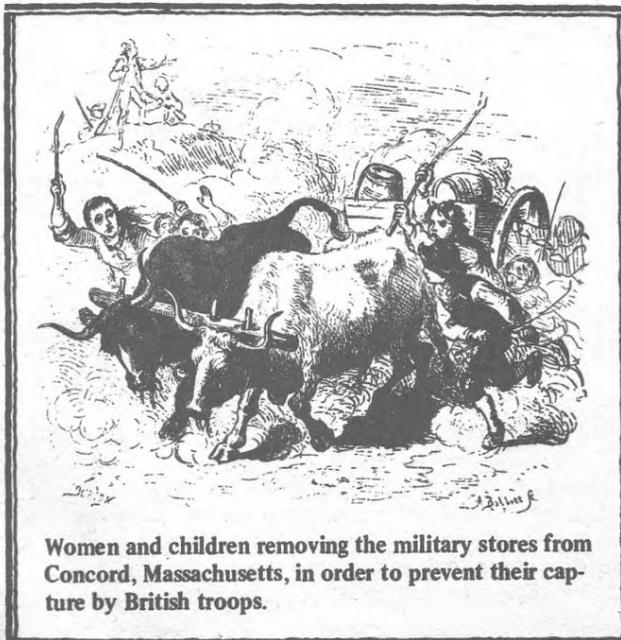
In all states the Tories were expelled from any office they might have held and barred from election. They were forbidden to vote or serve as ministers, teachers, lawyers, and doctors either by law or practice. Prominent Tories were exiled and banished. Tory property was confiscated and sold to raise revenue for the revolutionary cause.

Tories were subject to house arrest, were imprisoned and even sent to forced labor camps as in the Simsbury mines in Connecticut. Tories were denied trial by jury, bail and the right of appeal. Numerous Tories were executed, some legally, many more by state militia and irregular guerilla units. Relatives of Tories were sometimes jailed as hostages to insure neutral behavior.

While excesses were undoubtedly committed (as they undoubtedly were in other more recent revolutions), the basic policy was clearly necessary and successful. That the founding fathers understood this is made clear in a letter from Madison to Jefferson when he noted the extraordinary powers placed in the hands of the Governor of Pennsylvania: "I understand they have invested the Executive with a dictatorial authority from which nothing but the lives of their citizens are exempted. I hope the good resulting from it will be such to compensate for the risk of the precedent." Madison's hopes were borne out; the Tories never succeeded in organizing any significant opposition to the revolutionary effort. Ruthless suppression of counter-revolution is vital to the success of any revolution.

### THE MILITARY CONDUCT OF THE REVOLUTION

As the strongest colonial power in the world, Great Britain expected to defeat the rag-tag revolutionary army in a matter of months. Britain had the world's biggest navy -- the revolution had none. The British Army had never been beaten and was considered to have the best trained and equipped troops in the world. Britain had five times the population and many more times the wealth of the colonies. The arrogant sense of superiority of the British was expressed by the First Lord of the British Admiralty right before the war: "These are raw, undisciplined, cowardly men. I wish instead of forty or fifty thousand of these brave fellows, they would produce in the field at least two hundred thousand; the more the better, the easier would be the conquest. Believe me, my Lords, the very sound of cannon would carry them off as fast as their feet would carry them."



Women and children removing the military stores from Concord, Massachusetts, in order to prevent their capture by British troops.