Labour/Le Travailleur

Reply to Martin Glaberman

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Cite this review

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THE WAR AIM of the South was to reconstitute a Union committed to the expansion of slavery. A Southern victory would have led to a slaveholders' republic stretching from Canada to Brazil. "Accumulate! Accumulate! That is Moses and the Prophets." Accumulation, not the wage system, is the hallmark of capital. Living labour produces a surplus which becomes a power commanding an ever-growing number of labourers. The pressure to accumulate drove the slaveholders as it did the bourgeoisie of the North, even if it did not lead to the same changes in the value composition of capital. Marx called the slaveholders capitalists. Of course they were anomalies, but *anomalous* does not mean *outside of*. It means *exceptional*, and American slavery was part of a world capitalist system as much as Hitler's or Stalin's slave-labour camps.

Most of those who deny the proletarian character of the slaves do so in order to devalue their movement, to treat it as an auxiliary of a bourgeois project. It is the popular front projected backward in time. Foner takes that view, and the aim of my review was to point out the connection between the history and the politics. To the extent Glaberman shares Foner's analysis, he reproduces his *political* stance. A rebellion, a *jacquerie* (a rebellion of rural dispossessed without proletarian content is inevitably a *jacquerie*) can only go so far. But whoever, least of all Glaberman, ever said that a strike, and especially a general strike, is by definition limited to changing conditions at particular work places? The genius of Du Bois was that he recognized that black slavery and freedom were the "kernal and meaning" of the *labour* movement in the US.

We are not talking here about students of indeterminate and varied class background. The slaves of the cotton South were the most important single source of surplus value in the country. As C.L.R. James observed of the slaves in Saint Domingue, they more closely resembled a modern proletariat than any other group of workers of the time.

Universal suffrage, universal arming of the people, division of the land, and the other measures attempted by the Reconstruction governments may have been part of the bourgeois revolution in 1648 or 1789, but they were no longer so in

1848, nor in post-Civil War America, nor in any place in the world since —
otherwise the bourgeoisie has everywhere for a century-and-a-half been engaging
in the curious project of drowning its own revolution in blood. Nor will it will do
to cite post-Reconstruction Afro-American voting allegiance (in those places
where Afro-Americans could vote) to the party they identified with black power
— any more than to cite, as evidence of backwardness, the decades-long adherence
of the French and Italian workers to the parties of the Resistance. In both the
American and European cases the allegiance was part of what remained *after* the
bid for freedom was crushed. Whatever it represented on the national scale, in the
post-Civil War South the Republican Party was the part of labour. And even long
after substance had decayed into symbol, the Southern Republican Party retained
more elements of the proletarian vision than the white-supremacist Socialist Party,
let alone the official party of white supremacy and white labour, the Democrats
(although not more than the Industrial Workers of the World which many black
workers also supported).

   Historical controversy is always contemporary. At issue here is the role of
masses of producers whose product confronts them as capital but whose relation
to capital is not mediated by a wage. In other words, we are talking about the
Zapatistas.