

A LABOR VOICE FOR BLACK EQUALITY:
THE *BOSTON DAILY EVENING VOICE*, 1864-1867

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THIS ARTICLE DEALS WITH ONLY ONE of the many labor publications which emerged at the close of the Civil War, and it concentrates on only one of the many issues with which this journal concerned itself. The newspaper is the *Boston Daily Evening Voice* and the issue is the role of white labor with respect to black workers—especially the newly-emancipated four million black slaves. Of all the labor periodicals of the period, the *Voice* was the only one to champion the cause of unity of black and white labor in all areas of American life on the basis of equality. It was not only unique among the labor papers of its time, but it stood far ahead, in its social vision, of the vast majority of labor publications ever since.

The outbreak of the Civil War extinguished most of the trade unions which flourished during the 1850s. By the middle of 1862, and particularly after 1863, workers again began to move into unions. The early war depression was over, and business and industry were prospering as never before. Workingmen failed to reap any benefits from the good times that began late in 1862. Soaring prices rendered the vast majority worse off than they had been in 1860. Organization became a matter of urgent necessity. "Organize! Organize!" appealed Jonathan Fincher, editor of *Fincher's Trades' Review*, in December, 1863, "organize in every village and hamlet, and become tributary and auxiliary to district, county, state and national trade organizations."¹

Long before this call was issued the revival of trade unionism had started in earnest. Beginning in early 1863, scarcely a week passed without the formation of a new union in some part of the country. Between December, 1863 and December, 1864, the number

¹ *Fincher's Trades' Review*, December 26, 1863.

of local unions (as reported to *Fincher's Trades' Review*) increased from 79 to 270. The national unions also expanded—21 new national unions were created in the decade 1860 to 1870, with the largest upsurge coming during the 1863–1865 period. Until 1865, however, the real center of organizational activity was not the national union but the city trades assembly. The city-council of labor unions, the key institution of the labor movement of the 1830s, became once again the agency for organizing mutual strike assistance, giving direction to labor's political activities, and supporting the labor press.²

The wartime revival of trade unions and city assemblies was helped by, and in turn stimulated, the reemergence of a labor press. In all about 130 daily, weekly, and monthly journals representing labor and advocating labor reform were launched between 1863 and 1873.³ Of these several outstanding ones were formed by the printers themselves, usually during lock-outs. Perhaps because of the greater education necessary to pursue their trade, and certainly because they possessed the particular skills, printers took the lead as labor journalists.⁴ Among the papers they established were the *Workingman's Advocate* of Chicago, the *Daily Press* of St. Louis, the *Union* of Detroit, and what George E. McNeill in his 1888 work, *The Labor Movement*, called "the most important" of the labor papers, "the *Daily Evening Voice* of the Boston Typographical Union."⁵

The *Voice* was a product of the employers' offensive which got under way late in 1863 to destroy the newly-formed unions. In November, 1864 the morning newspapers in Boston discharged their union printers. The Printers' Union answered the lock-out with a

2 Lloyd Ulman, *The Rise of the National Trade Union* (Cambridge, Mass., 1955), p. 306; John R. Commons et al., *History of Labor in the United States*, (New York, 1918), Vol. II, pp. 21–26, 58–60.

3 Philip S. Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States* (New York, 1947), Vol. I, p. 349.

4 Frank Luther Mott, the distinguished historian of American journalism, makes the point that most early American journalists were printers. (*American Journalism*, New York, 1941, p. 313). His book, however, is a good example of the neglect of labor papers in works on the history of American journalism. Mott mentions briefly only two English language labor papers, the *Workingmen's Advocate* (p. 205) and the *Alarm* (p. 487). He also mentions the *Arbeiter-Zeitung* (p. 487).

5 George McNeill, *The Labor Movement. The Problem of Today* (New York, 1888), p. 127.

strike.⁶ During the strike, the locked-out printers organized the "Voice Printing Company" to publish a newspaper under the title *Boston Daily Evening Voice*. Three union printers were elected to act as trustees: Henry L. Saxton, Wm. Knollen, and Abram Keach. The first issue of the *Voice* appeared on December 2, 1864, carrying a "Prospectus" which informed the public that "a number of practical workmen, skilled in the art of printing and publishing a newspaper," had undertaken the publication of a daily evening paper "in the columns of which the rights of Labor—without distinction of sex, complexion or birthplace, shall be advocated, and the 'wrongs' asserted before the bar of an enlightened public opinion." They had been compelled to take this step by the necessity of earning a living. Because they were members of a trades union, which they had every right to form, they had been "thrown on the street." While they sought to win support from all members of the community, they were especially anxious to obtain the backing of the working class. "We speak the language of the laborer, and if we are understood by him, we are content."

The *Voice* company capitalized itself at \$20,000 and issued shares. Seven trades' unions and six individuals invested, and in April, 1865 the company assured the public that if a sufficient number of additional shares were taken up to enable the officers to purchase "the necessary implements of Press, etc., and to open an office in some good business locality, there is not the slightest reason for doubting its entire success."⁷

The *Voice* company purchased a press and offices were set up at 77 Washington Street. Here, until the fall of 1867, the paper "published in the interests of workingmen" was put together and printed, and commercial printing, mainly for trades unions and eight-hour leagues, was performed. On March 31, 1866 the *Boston Weekly Voice* made its appearance, composed of selected material from the week's daily issues. The daily sold for two cents per copy; the weekly for five cents per copy. Subscribers paid \$6 a year for the daily and \$2 for the weekly.⁸

6 *Boston Daily Evening Transcript*, December 1, 1864. The strike ended in a defeat for the Printers' Union.

7 *Boston Daily Evening Voice*, April 17, 1865.

8 The cost per hundred for the daily was \$125. Five, ten, and twenty copies of the weekly for the same address cost \$9, \$17, and \$30 respectively.

The *Voice* claimed "a larger *circulation* among the Workingmen of New England than any other publication." Its appearance coincided with the re-emergence of the struggle for the ten-hour day by the factory workers of New England. By championing their cause the paper secured a fair circulation among the mill workers. But its subscribers were mainly members of the organized trades unions and eight-hour leagues in and around Boston. The Boston Trades' Assembly adopted it as its official organ, and the Grand Mass Meeting of workers in Faneuil Hall, Boston, November 2, 1865, hailed the paper as "a fearless and able advocate of our cause, and consider it the paramount duty of the workingmen of Massachusetts to sustain this paper, as the only true and legitimate organ of labor published in the State."⁹

The *Daily Voice* had four large pages, several columns to the page. (The *Weekly Voice*, issued every Thursday, had the same format.) The front page was usually devoted to national and international news, articles on labor subjects, speeches and public documents, and poetry and songs. Editorials, trade union news, correspondence, reprints from other papers, advertisements, notices of trade union and eight-hour league meetings, made up the rest.¹⁰ Reminding its readers that the labor movement was "no local or temporary thing" but international in scope, the *Voice* paid attention to news of labor activities in England, France, and Germany. "The zeal of our transatlantic brethren should kindle our own," it counseled.¹¹

The cause of the working classes, the *Voice* repeatedly emphasized, was in every sense, "conducive and essential to the GENERAL WELFARE." An eight-hour day for men and women workers, the key demand of the labor reform movement, would benefit the community as a whole. The "independence, intelligence, and moral development of the masses" were "the only sure foundation of our Republican System of Government."¹²

9 *Boston Daily Evening Voice*, November 3, 1865. The meeting was called to launch a campaign for the eight-hour day.

10 The fact that the notices at times included meetings of unions in cities as far west as San Francisco indicates that the paper had some national circulation.

11 *Boston Daily Evening Voice*, September 25, 1865.

12 *Ibid.*, September 12, 1866, April 3, 1867. For a discussion of the labor reform movement, see David Montgomery, *Beyond Equality: Labor and the Radical Re-*

Convinced that the education of the working class was essential for the preservation of American democracy, the *Voice* constantly called for labor schools, classes in political economy, libraries, and reading rooms.¹³ The paper noted the fact that the public libraries of Boston were closed on Sundays, and readers were urged to vote only for mayoralty and city council candidates who would pledge to open these facilities when workers could best make use of them.¹⁴ The *Voice* was deeply concerned about the public schools of Boston, carrying a series of articles pointing up the inadequacies of the curriculum, the poor quality of the teachers, the antiquated books and equipment and concluding that too many children were graduated at the age of fifteen "with no better instruction than they should have had at twelve."¹⁵ The *Voice* opened a discussion on the need for free colleges. "If we think so much of free schools," it declared, "why do we not carry out the system and have our colleges free?"¹⁶

Although it was one of the best-edited of the many labor papers of the 1860s, the positions adopted by the *Voice* on such issues as the shorter working day, mass education of the working class, political action, and labor reform in general were similar to those of many other papers.¹⁷ But in a number of respects the *Voice* was unique.

It was, for example, far in advance of most of the labor papers in championing the cause of women workers. While some other labor papers carried news about the plight of women workers and commented sympathetically on their special difficulties, the *Voice* did more. It called upon male workers to assist women to organize and to open their unions to women. It congratulated New York trade unionists who established a library to which working women could have access at a nominal charge. But it reminded them that this was only a preparation for the "next step," which was to assist the working women to organize and secure higher wages and shorter hours: "till they do this they will have but little time and not much

publicans, 1862-1872 (New York, 1967), pp. 91, 113, 123, 125, 369, 373, 411, 422, 426, 446.

13 *Boston Daily Evening Voice*, May 20, October 6, 1865; June 20, 27, 1867.

14 *Ibid.*, November 22, 1866. See also issues of May 12, 1865; February 27, 1866.

15 *Ibid.*, September 9-October 2, 1865.

16 *Ibid.*, October 3, 1865.

17 *Fincher's Trades' Review*, however, opposed political activity by labor.

money to patronize their library."¹⁸ These two sentences sum up the *Voice's* position: "The laboring classes never will be elevated without the elevation of women—never. While woman is obligated to work like a slave to earn her bread, the country is as hopeless of any progress as Sahara of vegetation." Late in its career, the *Voice* called on labor to consider the demand of women for the right to vote so that "equal suffrage" could read "regardless of sex," and that no distinction of preference should exist in the United States founded on "sex."¹⁹

However, the thing that most sharply distinguished the *Boston Daily Evening Voice* from the rest of the labor press of its day was its position on two fundamental issues: Reconstruction and black-white labor unity.

At the conclusion of the Civil War, organized labor was faced with a number of serious problems: how to cope with the unemployment arising from demobilization, the sudden cessation of war contracts, the renewal of large-scale immigration, and the post-war depression, which began late in 1865 and lasted until well into 1867. It was necessary to determine how, under these conditions, to strengthen the trade unions and advance the movement for an eight-hour day without a decrease in pay. To these questions, the *Boston Daily Evening Voice* of May 2, 1866, added another: "Can white workingmen ignore colored ones?"

This question had to be faced. Slavery as a labor system had been eliminated, and several million blacks had been added to the nation's free labor supply. How were these millions of ex-slaves to earn a living? Were they to be given the right to vote, or were they to be in effect enslaved again? Were they to be used to strengthen the power of the employers or of the labor movement?

One issue was immediate: the use of black strikebreakers. Employers were refusing the demands of unskilled workers, confident that they could replace strikers with blacks, and at lower pay. In the spring of 1866, the labor press reported that an emigration company was being organized for the purpose of shipping 200,000–300,000 Negro workers from the south to the manufacturing centers

18 *Boston Daily Evening Voice*, May 2, 1865.

19 *Ibid.*, January 27, December 27, 1866.

of New England, thus enabling employers to lower their labor cost and defeat any move to raise wages or reduce working hours.

The threat of Negro competition was a problem for skilled workers as well. Before the Civil War, free blacks in the South had been engaged in many occupations requiring a high degree of skill. Many ex-slaves who had gained experience in the army, freedman's camps, and relief associations during the war were added to the reservoir of skilled black workers. On an inspection tour of the South in 1868, John M. Langston, an agent for the Freedmen's Bureau, reported that there were at least two Negro craftsmen for every white one in Mississippi, and six Negro mechanics for every white mechanic in North Carolina.²⁰

While acknowledging that the bulk of the freedmen were primarily an agrarian population, the *Boston Daily Evening Voice* noted that there was already a large enough group of skilled black workers to constitute a threat to northern urban workers unless they were organized. Moreover, even the agrarian blacks could become allies of northern labor, if not precisely in the trade unions, at least in a political movement to achieve reforms in American society of value both to urban and agrarian workers. But to achieve this goal, the *Voice* insisted, the white workers would have to alter their traditional policies toward black workers.²¹

Before the Civil War white workingmen had systematically excluded Negroes from their crafts, and this situation changed only slightly after the war. Some national unions, like the Cigar Makers, the Carpenters and Joiners, and the Coopers excluded blacks from membership until 1871. Most national unions, however, left the matter of qualifications for admission entirely up to the locals, with the result that exclusion of black workers was the standard pattern in the American labor movement. Where the unions had agreements with employers that only union members could be hired, this pattern resulted in excluding the black worker from the workshop as well as from the union. In some cities the unions sought actively, some-

²⁰ *Workingmen's Advocate*, March 24, 1866; *Boston Daily Evening Voice*, February 26, April 3, 16, 1866; *Christian Recorder*, August 11, 1866.

²¹ *Boston Daily Evening Voice*, November 28, 1865; January 27, 1866.

times by the use of violence, to drive all Negroes out of the skilled trades.²²

Some white labor leaders understood that union policies of racial exclusion only provided employers with a supply of strike-breakers, and they urged the unity of labor regardless of race and color as the only practical solution. William H. Sylvis, president of the Iron Molders' International Union, and Andrew C. Cameron, editor of the Chicago *Workingmen's Advocate*, emphasized that self-interest dictated cooperation between white and black labor.²³ But the advanced position of Sylvis and Cameron on the question of accepting blacks into the labor movement, a minority position among labor leaders of the era, was never advocated consistently and was never made a key issue in their program for labor reform. Moreover, Sylvis and Cameron, along with the vast majority of white trade unionists, had no understanding of the problems facing the freedmen during Reconstruction.

In addition to the legal freedom set forth in the Thirteenth Amendment, the freedmen demanded political and civil rights, and a material base for their freedom—forty acres and a mule. To the freedmen ownership of land meant freedom from masters and overseers, from the system of control that characterized slavery. "We will still be slaves," was their common refrain, "until every man can raise his own bale of cotton, and say: 'This is mine.'"²⁴

With rare exceptions, however, the blacks did not get land and they received no political and civil rights immediately following the Civil War. Instead, under the Reconstruction policies of President Andrew Johnson, they received the "Black Codes." The "Black Codes," the Freedmen's Bureau reported to Congress, "actually served to secure to the former slaveholding class the unpaid labor which they had been accustomed to enjoy before the war."²⁵

22 Sumner Eliot Matison, "The Labor Movement and the Negro during Reconstruction," *Journal of Negro History*, Vol. XXXIII, October, 1948, pp. 426-42; F. E. Wolfe, *Admission to American Trade Unions*, Baltimore, 1912, pp. 114, 123, 131.

23 Foner, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 396-97.

24 *Atlantic Monthly*, February, 1866, p. 606.

25 James S. Allen, *Reconstruction: The Battle for Democracy* (New York, 1937), pp. 57-59. Foner, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 390-391. Under the codes, adopted in all of the Southern states, a Negro who was not at work was arrested and imprisoned. In order to pay off the prison charges and fines he was hired out. If a Negro quit work before his contract expired, he was arrested and imprisoned for breach

Negro conventions met during the summer and fall of 1865 to protest against the Johnson Reconstruction policy. They won the support of former white abolitionists and Radical Republicans who were determined to stop the President from returning the slaveholding elements in the South to political power and the ex-slaves to a status closely resembling slavery. Allied with them in this campaign were sections of the industrial and financial class in the North who feared that under Johnson's program an alliance of northern and southern Democrats and groups of discontented farmers of the West would unseat the Republican Party and eliminate many of the gains they had obtained during the Civil War when the Southern states were out of the Union. Protective tariffs might be reduced; the national banking system might be abolished; and the currency system might give way to cheap money.²⁶

In this struggle against Johnson's Reconstruction policy what was the position of the labor movement? A few trade unionists and leaders of eight-hour leagues condemned Johnson's program, and called upon all white workers to understand that the men who were seeking to crush the black workingman in the South would, if they were victorious, soon destroy the rights of the white laboring man.²⁷ But these were solitary voices. The majority of white workers and trade unionists endorsed Johnson's Reconstruction program. Most white workers thought of Andrew Johnson not as the President who was restoring the former slaveowners to power and reestablishing a form of slavery for black workers in the South, but as the poor tailor of Tennessee who had introduced a Homestead Bill in Congress in the 1850s and fought for its passage in 1862. They hailed the presence

of contract and the reward to the person performing the arrest was deducted from his wages. Some of the codes also provided that if a Negro laborer left his employer he would "forfeit all wages to the time of abandonment." Negro children whose parents were considered too poor to support them were bound out as apprentices, girls until 18 years of age and boys until 21. In Mississippi the code provided that if a Negro could not pay taxes to care for the poor, he would be regarded as a vagrant and hired out; it clearly asserted that the laws under chattel slavery were to be in full force again "except so far as the mode and manner of trial and punishment have been changed and altered by the law."

26 New York *Herald*, August 10, 1865; Allen, *op. cit.*, pp. 73-78; W. E. B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (New York, 1935), pp. 230-33; Howard K. Beale, "The Tariff and Reconstruction," *American Historical Review*, Vol. XXXV, January, 1930, pp. 276-94; *The Nation*, January 11, 1866.

27 Foner, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 299-300.

in the White House of one who had been a worker, believing with the Philadelphia Trades' Assembly that "he will exercise the prerogatives of his office for the maintenance and advancement of the General Government, and also for the benefit of the working classes."²⁸

At the same time white workers were suspicious of elements in the alliance which was fighting Johnson's policies. The fact that sections of the industrial and financial classes were part of this coalition was enough to alienate a large segment of organized labor, for to many workers the immediate enemy was not the old slave-owning oligarchy, but the new industrial one. The strategy of the industrialists and financiers, argued the *Workingman's Advocate*, was to divert the attention of the workers from the "struggle between capital and labor" by riveting it on the events in the South and thus "distract the public mind from matters of vital importance to the toiling masses." Meanwhile the financiers and industrialists would continue their seizure of the public lands, and impose an unjust monetary system on the nation. By the time the workingmen woke up and turned their attention from events in the South to developments in the North, the conspiracy would have succeeded, and instead of a Republic, America would be a land ruled by financial and industrial monarchists.²⁹ When Andrew Johnson denounced the Radical Republicans for attempting to use the Negro in the South as a tool to enhance the power of a new oligarchy of financial and industrial capitalists, the majority of the labor papers applauded. "All honor to the President for his practical sympathy with labor," declared the *National Workman*.³⁰

Thus most white workers thought the answer to the threat of the use of black labor as strikebreakers was to exclude Negroes from their unions and the trades; and their response to the struggle of the Negro people in the South for political, civil and economic rights, was at best one of indifference. Moreover, even those white labor leaders who did urge that Negroes be organized into the trade unions, did not indicate any sympathy for a radical program of Reconstruction. Both groups agreed that the Thirteenth Amend-

28 *Fincher's Trades' Review*, May 6, 1865.

29 *Workingman's Advocate*, August 11, 1866.

30 *National Workman*, October 20, 27, 1866.

ment had settled the status of the Negro, and that the federal government should now turn its attention to other issues.

While labor historians have pointed to the support given to Johnsonian Reconstruction by the labor movement and to its policy of excluding black workers, few have noted that there was a labor voice in this period which stood for both Radical Reconstruction and black-white labor unity—the *Boston Daily Evening Voice*. Since we do not know much about the men who founded and conducted the *Voice*, we cannot explain with complete accuracy why they should have been so unique in the labor movement of that period. However, we do know that the men who founded the *Voice* belonged to the group of northern workers who before the Civil War were associated with the abolitionists. For one thing, the editors referred to their close friendship with George E. McNeill, the son of John McNeill, a shoemaker who was one of the early supporters of William Lloyd Garrison. The younger McNeill was himself prominent in the New England abolitionist movement on the eve of the war.³¹ For another, the editors of the *Voice* referred on several occasions to the fact that they had at one time been in the minority on the slavery issue because of their association with the Boston abolitionists, whereas the majority of the workers, fearing the competition of freed slaves who might come North, had not been friendly to the abolitionists.³² They insisted, however, that while prejudice died hard, the war had helped create a climate in Boston more friendly to the Negro, and that a number of white workers had returned from the war with their views about blacks changed.³³

31 McNeill organized a club of subscribers for the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* among Boston workers. In forwarding the subscriptions, he wrote to the *Standard*: "Now that the black man has come out of the bondage of chattel slavery, as his white brother, centuries ago came out of villeinage, it is well that you, who have so earnestly and faithfully worked for his enfranchisement, should unite him to us his fellow workers in unity of purpose and harmony of action." (*National Anti-Slavery Standard*, April 9, 1870.)

McNeill showed his support for the *Boston Daily Evening Voice* by getting subscribers, soliciting advertisements, and forming *Voice* clubs. When the labor paper ceased publication in October, 1867, the staff presented McNeill with one of the only two complete sets of the paper. (*Labor Standard*, July 28, 1877.)

32 *Boston Daily Evening Voice*, October 11, 1866.

33 For evidence that this view was not an exaggeration, see Donald Martin Jacobs, "A History of the Boston Negro from the Revolution to the Civil War," unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Boston University, 1968, pp. 362, 369-70.

Such workers, they said, were ready to back a paper which supported a plan of Reconstruction that offered blacks more than mere legal freedom and advocated black-white labor unity. Moreover, the editors believed that by educating the workers on the necessity of endorsing such a twin policy, they could build firm support for the paper, even though their views were far in advance of prevailing opinion in labor circles.³⁴

This educational campaign took the form of news reports, dispatches from the South and the nation's capital (the latter from the *Voice's* own correspondent), editorials, extracts from speeches, statistical material, even poetry—all aimed at informing and convincing white workers that it was necessary to oppose Johnson's Reconstruction policies, to rally behind a program that would insure meaningful freedom for the emancipated slaves, and to understand that unity of black and white labor was essential for the success of the labor movement.

Day after day the *Voice* attacked Johnson's Reconstruction policies as designed to keep the freedmen "under a despotism worse than slavery itself." "No workingman," it warned, "should be found with that party."

Leaving the question of Negro suffrage to the whites of the former rebel states is an abandonment of the cause of the defenceless freedmen by the Government he has served. . . . There should be no reconstruction without the full recognition of the Negro's manhood, and there should be an energetic superintendence of affairs in the late rebel states till they may be trusted with government.

Day after day, too, the *Voice* attacked those ready to surrender, gave clear arguments to the confused, and led its readers in the struggle against Johnson's policies:

We ask workingmen to consider that this [Johnson's] plan will degrade black labor and cheapen it, and will consequently cheapen white labor. . . . Put the black laborer in a position to act like a *man*, and he will get a fair price for his work, in which case we will risk but that his white competitor will get a fair price too; but make a dog of him, and he'll get a dog's pay, and we white men, compete as best we may, will not get much better.³⁵

³⁴ *Boston Daily Evening Voice*, March 11, 1865.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, December 28, 1865; January 24, April 19, 1866.

The *Voice's* educational campaign also featured stories about the contributions black soldiers had made to Union victory, reports of speeches of prominent blacks like Frederick Douglass, extracts from the proceedings of Negro conventions in the South, and news about the rise of a Southern Negro press. The purpose was to convince white workers that blacks, including the recently liberated slaves, were quite as capable as whites of playing a constructive and intelligent role in the American body politic.³⁶ The campaign also sought to convince white workers that Garrison and other abolitionists, and not Johnson and his allies, were the true friends of labor. The *Voice* was aware that many Boston workers believed that the anti-slavery men, with some notable exceptions like Wendell Phillips, had been unsympathetic to labor's cause before the Civil War.³⁷ It pointed out that during the Civil War a number of prominent abolitionists had endorsed the eight-hour day, and some had contributed financially to the shorter-hour movement. It featured on its front page a letter from Garrison to Ira Steward, the eight-hour spokesman, in which the abolitionist leader announced that he supported the labor reformers on "the same principle which has led me to abhor and oppose the unequalled oppression of the black laborers of the South."³⁸ By presenting evidence that many of those who were championing full freedom for the ex-slaves were also sympathetic to the labor reform movement, the *Voice* sought to break down the long-standing hostility of many white workers towards the abolitionists.

The *Voice's* educational campaign revolved around two principles: justice and self-interest. The two were interrelated. In order to succeed, the labor reform cause must have a good case; it must appeal to the sense of justice which, if not universal, is latent in a great many people. That it had a good case was clear; its demand for improvement in the conditions and status of workers in American

36 *Ibid.*, January 31, February 2, May 3, November 9, 1865; March 21, May 2, July 26, September 7, 1866.

37 Bernard Mandel, *Labor: Free and Slave* (New York, 1955), pp. 90-91, 136-37, 139-40.

38 *Boston Daily Evening Voice*, May 2, 1866. David Montgomery criticizes labor historians, myself included, for giving the impression that among "the anti-slavery men of the Bay State Wendell Phillips alone was sympathetic to labor's cause. . . ." (*op. cit.*, pp. 223-24.)

society was a continuation of the movement to end slavery, a cause which had triumphed because it was based on justice. But how, asked the *Voice*, could white workers expect to convince the community that their demands were based on justice when they were guilty of denying justice to other workers simply because of the color of their skin? Such an attitude might satisfy their prejudices, but it was shortsighted even from the point of view of enlightened self-interest. It would, in the end, wreak havoc with the campaign for labor reform and doom it to failure.³⁹ Hence white labor could not afford to be indifferent to the merited claims of black labor for an equal place in American society. Nor could it ignore the fact that under the policies of the so-called friend of labor, Andrew Johnson, the American political community was being defined as one which excluded Negroes, exactly, in short, as Justice Roger B. Taney had defined it in the notorious Dred Scott decision of 1857. Was it to sanctify the Dred Scott decision that white workers had fought and sacrificed so much for the Union cause during four terrible years of war?⁴⁰

As the *Voice* saw it, labor had the duty of rectifying past errors and flaws in American democracy. The founding fathers had made a tragic mistake in their conception of political liberty. "As apprehended by our fathers," the *Voice* editorialized on October 3, 1865, "political liberty meant only the liberty of their own white race; and for nearly ninety years the practical slavery of a whole race stood side by side among us with the freedom of the Anglo-Saxon, and that in the face of the theoretical dogma that 'all men are created equal.'" The inevitable consequence of this error had been a devastating civil war. Failure to eliminate every vestige of inequality based on race or color from American life meant that the war had been fought in vain, and that a new internecine conflict might be required to make the principles of the Declaration of Independence a reality. Labor had the duty to prevent such a tragedy by allying itself with all who stood for a policy of equality for black Americans. The *Voice* conceded that there were those who advocated equality for blacks for the political or economic benefits they hoped to derive from the Negro vote, but it insisted that labor could not remain aloof from

³⁹ *Boston Daily Evening Voice*, September 2, October 5, 1865; March 10, 1866.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, August 27, 1867.

alliance with these groups even though it had no admiration for the motives behind their program of Reconstruction. Indeed, if white workers would unite with the aristocrats of wealth to assure the Negro the right to vote, the combined political power of white and black labor could then be used to unseat the men of wealth from power and usher in a new social order for the benefit of all workers, white and black.⁴¹

Given citizenship and the right to vote, the *Voice* argued, black labor in the South could become the political ally of white labor in advancing the cause of labor reform. But it was too much to expect that the enfranchised black voters would use their power at the ballot-box to aid the labor reform movement if they were convinced that white labor was in alliance with their worst enemies—Johnson and his ex-slaveowning cohorts. Nor could black labor be expected to throw its political support behind a labor reform movement based on trade unions which excluded black workers and sought to drive them out of the workshops. Common sense, if not tragic experience, should convince white workers that if they proved to black labor that they were the enemies of black workers, then black labor would line up with the class enemy of white labor, and its economic and political strength would be used by the employers to weaken and disrupt both the unions and labor reform politics.⁴²

The *Voice* warned white workers not to view the employers' threat to bring black labor North to replace white labor at lower wages as sheer propaganda. It pointed out that Irish railroad workers in Cambridge, Massachusetts, who stopped work when two blacks were hired, soon found themselves all replaced by colored workmen, and that several strikes of white workers had already been broken by the use of Negroes imported from the South.⁴³ How could this threat be met? Certainly not by rioting against the black workers; such action would only lead to the arrest of the rioters, and, in the end, the replacement of the entire white force by black labor. The only correct way, as the *Voice* saw it, was for white labor to fight for a Radical Reconstruction policy which included political and civil rights for economic security—land distribution for the freedmen and

41 *Ibid.*, September 22, December 13, 18, 1865; March 21, June 20, 1866.

42 *Ibid.*, October 14, November 14, 15, 1865; April 19, May 15, 1866.

43 *Ibid.*, May 7, 1866.

decent wages and working conditions for Southern agricultural labor. Then black labor, even though it had the right to migrate as did any other worker, would have no reason to move North in search of a better life. If wages for blacks in the South were kept low, moreover, they would set the standard for the nation. The blow aimed at blacks in the South would strike white labor in the North within short order. Then again, Southern black workers who received decent wages would provide a market for goods produced in the North and thus would help keep white labor employed.⁴⁴

The *Voice* repeatedly insisted that white labor must realize that exclusion of blacks from their organizations played into the hands of the employers. It cited cases where white workers went on strike, and blacks, excluded from the union, continued to work, causing a defeat for the whites. It prominently featured the experience of the white workers of New Orleans who had organized an eight-hour league which rigidly excluded blacks from membership. When white laborers struck for an eight-hour day in the spring of 1866, Negroes did not hesitate to act as scabs and break the strike. "How many kicks like that which the workingmen of New Orleans have received," the *Voice* asked, "will be required to give them the hint that they cannot ignore the stubborn fact that the colored laborer of the country is henceforth in competition with the white; and if the white will not lift the colored up, the colored will drag the white down?"⁴⁵ Labor had to establish a common front, regardless of color, against the common enemy.

The *Voice* had only scorn for those in labor's ranks who argued that the battle for democracy in the South was of no concern to the labor movement, that it was, in fact, a "non-labor issue." These elements—and they represented the majority of white trade unionists—insisted that the Thirteenth Amendment had settled the Negro question, and that by continually harping on black-white labor unity and the need to support a Radical Reconstruction policy, the *Voice* was putting the interests of black labor above those of its readers and the labor movement as a whole. The *Voice* answered the charge: "We could certainly be tender of the people's prejudices, but . . . we are engaged in a great work, in which the

44 Ibid., February 26, March 15, 24, April 3, 16, August 22, 1866.

45 Ibid., March 30, May 7, 21, July 20, 1866.

question of Negro manhood suffrage—of universal freedom, of consistent democracy—is fundamental and vital. We *must* teach truth—We *must* walk in the light or we are sure to stumble and come short of our aim.”⁴⁶ And what is this truth? The *Voice* replied:

If the workingmen have learned anything, it is that there can be no hope of their success but in union—the union of all who labor. How mad and suicidal, then, to hold up one hand for the degradation of the Negro, while the other is raised for the elevation of the white laborer! Capital knows no difference between white and black laborers; and labor cannot make any, without undermining its own platform and tearing down the walls of its defence.

The whole power of labor is necessary to the successful resistance of the united power of capital. Otherwise, those left out of the union are forced, in self-defence, to take a position antagonistic to their brethren of class, and become co-operators with the enemy. If the Trades Unions of white men exclude black men, black men are obligated to underwork, and thus injure the cause of the white men. On the same principle, it is a damage to the cause of white labor that black labor should be ignorant and degraded.⁴⁷

The *Voice* made it clear that the Republican program of Reconstruction was more limited than the policy it advocated. It was critical of the fact that the Fourteenth Amendment did not include Negro suffrage,⁴⁸ and it was dismayed because the Congressional Acts of Reconstruction adopted over Johnson's veto in March, 1867, did not provide for land distribution among the freedmen.⁴⁹ The *Voice* published speeches by Thaddeus Stevens and Charles Sumner warning that failure to include land distribution would doom Radical Reconstruction since it would leave the freedmen at the mercy of the former slaveowners.⁵⁰ Editorially it expressed agreement with this interpretation, and to make the point even stronger,

46 *Ibid.*, January 11, 12, 20, February 2, March 23, November 14, 17, 1866. The leading labor critic of the *Voice* was the *Detroit Daily Union*, which accused the Boston paper of causing division and conflict in labor's ranks by agitating for Negro suffrage.

47 *Boston Daily Evening Voice*, January 13, 1866.

48 *Ibid.*, January 24, June 4, November 17, 1866.

49 *Ibid.*, January 19, October 3, 1866.

50 *Ibid.*, January 19, September 3, October 3, December 29, 1866.

it featured reports of the insurrection of blacks in Jamaica who in 1865 rose up in revolt against conditions not far removed from slavery, a revolt brutally suppressed by British troops. Noting that investigations had revealed that "by the tenancy-at-will system, introduced by the planters after emancipation in the island, the negroes are little better than slaves," operating as they did under a vicious system of sharecropping, the *Voice* warned that failure to distribute land among the ex-slaves in the United States would produce the same conditions in this country. "It is to be hoped that the reconstructionists in this country may learn wisdom from the experience of the Jamaica planters; and instead of placing restrictions upon the negro population, and pursuing a policy to keep them degraded, hold out every opportunity and encouragement to them to make something of themselves." The lesson of the Jamaican insurrection was that half-freedom was practically no freedom at all!⁵¹

When the Congressional Acts of Reconstruction showed that their framers had not learned the lesson of Jamaica, the *Voice* praised those measures which enfranchised blacks in the South but simultaneously urged a campaign to add land distribution. It reminded its readers that "the noble legislator, Hon. Thaddeus Stevens, believed [this measure] . . . to be essential to preserve the freedom of the ex-slaves."⁵² But it soon became clear that the paper could not rally much support in labor circles for this more advanced position. The *Voice* abandoned the campaign, explaining that it was yielding to the inevitable; at the same time it justified its retreat with the argument that the Congressional Acts of Reconstruction, incorporating suffrage for Negroes in the South and providing for ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment, had achieved for the freedmen nearly all that the labor paper had been calling for since the end of the war. "The old issues are dying out,

51 *Ibid.*, December 2, 18, 1865; May 15, 1866.

52 *Ibid.*, March 5, 1867. While historians have traditionally interpreted the Reconstruction Acts of 1867 as radical measures, more recent scholarship has begun to view them as essentially conservative, since they marked the triumph not so much of the Radical Republicans as of the more conservative elements in the Republican Party. The task of enforcing the Reconstruction Acts was placed in the hands of the army, and since President Andrew Johnson was the commander-in-chief, the task of enforcement was in his hands. In short, the Radicals had not succeeded in taking Reconstruction completely out of the hands of a president hostile to their program.

the reconstruction problem which has been the mooted topic during the past year or two is practically solved." It was time to turn to making the labor reform program a reality.⁵³

Actually, of course, the "reconstruction problem" was far from solved. But the *Voice* had gone about as far as it could in pushing for a radical policy in the South without losing all labor support. More and more it was charged with sacrificing labor reform to the cause of a more complete freedom for Negroes, and with weakening the labor movement by its insistence on having "labor reform so comprehensive in its scope as to include black as well as white workmen."⁵⁴ More serious, these charges were causing a decline in the paper's revenue as workers, influenced by what the *Voice* editors dubbed "colorphobia," stopped renewing subscriptions.⁵⁵

It is to the credit of the editors that they refused to bow to the racists. In an effort to gain new subscribers, they inserted advertisements in various newspapers and issued circulars in which they openly proclaimed that the *Boston Daily Evening Voice*

recognizes no distinction of race or color, but maintains that justice to the freedmen is as essential to the salvation and prosperity of the nation as justice to the white laborer. We contend that their interests are identical, and that the workingmen of the North cannot consistently expect sympathy or protection until they are ready to extend the same, so far as they are able, to the less fortunate colored laborers of the South. The oppression of any large number of workingmen in any section of the country cannot fail to exert a depressing influence upon the condition and privileges of workingmen in other sections. Our strength and success, we believe, depends on unity of action and ideas. The Freedmen are forced to toil for their support as we are, and we cannot but look upon them as entitled to the same rights which we as laboring men claim for our class. The question of political liberty for the negro, is one which all other labor papers have sedulously avoided, fearing to create dissension and division in the labor movement, but the founders of the *Voice* . . . feeling that they could not sincerely defend their cherished principles, without first declaring for equal rights to all, determined not to defer to the mistaken views or prejudices of any particular number of their class, but to take a bold and unselfish position, demanding not only the full

53 Ibid., March 12, 1867.

54 Ibid., November 1, 1866.

55 Ibid., November 3, 1866.

enjoyment of what we considered justly due to us, but the same treatment for the freedmen of the South, who without our advantages, were forced not only to contend with the ordinary opposition of encroaching capital, but the brutality of their former masters.⁵⁶

As might be expected, so straightforward a declaration of equalitarian principles only intensified the criticism of the *Voice* in labor's ranks and added to the cancelled subscriptions. Nevertheless, the editors announced that they would not "subtract" a single sentence from the declaration.⁵⁷

But the days of the *Boston Daily Evening Voice* were numbered. Its financial situation was rendered even more precarious by the economic decline of the winter and spring of 1866-1867. Lay-offs and wage-cuts in Boston made it more difficult to raise funds from even those who still stood by the principles of the labor paper. Efforts to sustain the *Voice* by issuing new stock, organizing *Voice* clubs, and establishing a cooperative to publish the paper, staved off the day of doom for a few months. But on October 16, 1867 the editors announced that this was to be the last issue. In a "Valedictory" they recounted the paper's contribution to the working class and observed: "We have every reason to be satisfied with the moral results of our work, disastrous as it has proved to us pecuniarily."

So far as the issue of greater freedom for the Negro people in the South was concerned, this assertion can not be contested. The *Voice* had battled Johnson's Reconstruction policies and had seen them replaced by the era of Radical Reconstruction. It had contributed, in no small measure, to the change. As the *Voice* passed from the scene, the country was taking the first steps which, with all their limitations, were destined to usher in a new and more democratic way of life for blacks and poor whites in the South.

On the issue of black-white labor unity, which the *Voice* had advocated from its inception, there was less progress to report. As the paper was ending its career, the National Labor Union was holding its second convention in Chicago. The first convention of the federation of national and local trade unions, trades assemblies, and eight-hour leagues in 1866, had completely ignored the issue of

56. *Ibid.*, November 1, 17, December 1, 1866.

57 *Ibid.*, December 1, 1866.

black labor. At the second convention, there was at least a heated discussion of the issue, but the final decision once again was to ignore "the subject of negro labor."⁵⁸

Terming the decision "very discreditable to a body of American labor reformers," the *Voice* declared angrily:

The question should not have come up at all, any more than the question of redheaded labor, or blue-eyed labor. Of course the negro has the same right to work and pursue his happiness as the white man has; and of course, if the white man refuses to work with him, or to give him an equal chance, he will be obliged, in self defence, to underbid the white, and it is a disgrace to the Labor Congress that members of that body were so much under the influence of the silliest and wickedest of all prejudices as to hesitate to recognize the negro. When we need to get rid of prejudices and learn to take an enlightened, forward-looking view, they have nailed their prejudices into this platform. We shall never succeed until wiser counsels prevail and these prejudices are ripped up and thrown to the wind.⁵⁹

"We shall never succeed till wiser counsels prevail and these prejudices are ripped up and thrown to the wind." This was the last

58 *Workingman's Advocate*, August 24, 31, 1867. During the debate on the Negro question at the 1867 NLU convention, William H. Sylvis urged that Negroes be admitted to the unions so as to strengthen the labor movement. He insisted that there was no time for further delay: the use of white scabs against blacks and black scabs against white had already created an antagonism that would "kill off the Trades Unions" unless the two groups were consolidated. "If the Workingmen of the white race do not conciliate the blacks," he warned, "the black vote will be cast against them." This was a reference to the fact that under Congressional Reconstruction, Negroes in the South would soon gain the vote.

Andrew C. Cameron endorsed Sylvis's position in the *Workingman's Advocate*. However, unlike the *Boston Daily Evening Voice*, neither Sylvis nor Cameron understood the problems facing the Negro people in the South. Both had supported Johnson in his battle with Congress, and had opposed the Reconstruction Acts passed by Congress in March, 1867. Moreover, both Sylvis and Cameron viewed with disdain the Southern governments established under Congressional Reconstruction, in which blacks played an important role. They saw in them proof that the Reconstruction measures adopted by Congress over Johnson's veto were "disastrous" both for the South and the nation as a whole. See *Workingman's Advocate*, August 25, 1866, August 3, November 30, 1867, March 20, 27, May 8, 1869, and James C. Sylvis, *The Life, Speeches, Labor and Essays of William H. Sylvis, late President of the Iron Molders' Union and also of the National Labor Union* (Philadelphia, 1872), pp. 334-42.

59 *Boston Daily Evening Voice*, August 27, 1867.

statement of the *Boston Daily Evening Voice* on this crucial issue. It was far ahead of its time in advocating this principle, but as the history of the labor movement since 1867 has demonstrated, it was truly prophetic.

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The *SOUTHWEST LABOR HISTORY CONFERENCE* will be held on April 24-26, 1975 at the University of the Pacific, Stockton, California, under the auspices of the Pacific Center for Western Historical Studies. The sessions will be divided into two general areas: (1) southwest labor history and (2) national and international labor history. Scholars and trade unionists are invited to submit session proposals in areas including press, labor and politics, labor and race, women and labor, agricultural labor, Chicano labor, labor and socialism, labor in Mexico, international labor, comparative trade union movements. Address all program inquiries to: Professor Sally M. Miller, Department of History, University of the Pacific, Stockton, California 95204.