

THE LANCASHIRE COTTON 'FAMINE' 1861-65

"As long as the English cotton manufacturers depended on slave-grown cotton, it could truthfully be asserted that they rested on a twofold slavery, the indirect slavery of the white man in England and the direct slavery of the black men on the other side of the Atlantic." Karl Marx, New York Daily Tribune, October 14, 1861

Most accounts of the period 1861-5 in Lancashire draw a picture of a cotton industry dislocated by lack of supplies of raw cotton, as a result of the American Civil War and the blockade of Southern ports by the North. The workers, it is said, suffered with stoical resignation deprivations caused by events outside this country's control, a silence only broken to speak out in favour of the North which had caused their sufferings. The truth was more complex than this.

There would have been depression in the cotton industry in 1861-2 in any case, as a consequence of the overproduction which had taken place during the boom years of 1859-60. When the blockade began to hinder the arrival of supplies of cotton, some of the larger manufacturers and merchants actually managed to profit from it for a while, since their large stocks now commanded a higher price than expected. And towards the end of the cotton famine, in 1864, there is evidence of employers refusing to buy stocks of cotton which were then available, because of the low price of the finished article. In addition, throughout the period unemployment was caused here and there by the installation of labour saving machinery.

However, though intermingled with the manifestations of normal cyclical crises, the effects of the cotton famine were undoubtedly to add greatly to the misery of the times in Lancashire. The famine extended and prolonged unemployment, reduced earnings and worsened conditions of work (for instance through the use of inferior substitutes for American cotton). The Lancashire workers were faced with normal economic struggle against their employers but they also recognised the political issues involved in the Civil War. And in spite of their suffering they gave hearty support to Lincoln in the fight to prevent the establishment of the Confederate States as an American republic grounded on slavery.

The Lancashire cotton industry was at the height of a boom in 1860, with profits reaching 30% to 40% of capital invested, production higher than ever before and labour sought after. Some cotton districts were advertising for and securing workers from Norfolk and other distant counties. The boom was continuing early in 1861, but then prices of raw materials began to rise as markets for manufactured goods contracted.

Marx, in the article quoted from above, noted that up to August, 1861, the decrease in the American demand for cotton goods was offset by accumulation of stocks and speculative consignments to India and China. But these markets were soon glutted and prices forced down. As a result the increased price of raw materials could not be covered and

the spinning, weaving and printing of cotton was ceasing to pay costs of production. He quotes the case of one of the largest Manchester mills engaged in coarse spinning which in September, 1860, was making a profit of 1d. per lb. of warp sold but in September, 1861, a loss of 1 1/2d. Attempts were now being made to replace American cotton by fibres from eastern India - but here England was paying the price of past exploitation of the sub-continent in the shape of lack of transport and communications and the wretched subjection of the Indian peasant who was in no position to take advantage of the situation to force improvements. (On Colonialism, pp. 221-3). In fact the Indian cotton was very inferior and one of the main means of worsening already bad conditions in the mills.

The Reports of the Inspectors of Factories agree that there was over-production in 1860 which it would in any case have taken several years to absorb and that stockpiling reduced the first impact of the crisis. That for October, 1862, notes that "the demand for labour was ,.. already restricted many months before the effects of the blockade made themselves felt. Fortunately, many factories were thereby saved from ruin. The supplies rose in value so long as they were in stock and this prevented the appalling depreciation in value which is otherwise inevitable in such a crisis". The report for October, 1861, had earlier forecast: "it is not at all improbable that many factories will materially reduce their working day during the winter months. However, this was to be anticipated; quite apart from the causes which have interrupted the ordinary supply of cotton from America and the English exports it would have been necessary to reduce the hours of labour during the coming winter on account of the strong increase in production in the preceding three years".

Many factories were not; however, saved from ruin in the coming years. In 1861 there were 2,109 cotton mills in Lancashire and Cheshire, 35% of which used only engines of 20 h.p. or less. These, for the most part small weaving sheds built by speculators or mills owned cooperatively by cotton workers who had not the capital to weather a depression, bore the brunt of the crisis. By October, 1862, 60% of the spindles and 58% of the looms were idle. Of the remaining firms few were working anything like full time, which was 60 hours. Imports of raw cotton fell from 1,261 million lbs. in 1861 to 5.3 million lbs. in 1862 and did not recover to their previous level until 1'66.

The workers bear the brunt of the crisis

Inevitably the employers used every device to keep their mills open at the workers' expense. Even in the early months of 186/. several manufacturers attempted to reduce rate's by 5% to 7%. The workers struck, demanding short time rather than wage cuts, but after a month were defeated and suffered both a wage cut and short time.

The factory inspectors' report for October, 1863, quotes from a pamphlet by Blackburn cotton spinners: "the adult operatives of this mill have been asked to work 12 to 13 hours per day while there are hundreds who are compelled to be idle who would willingly work partial time.... There is in this district almost sufficient work to give all partial employment if fairly distributed. We are only asking what is right in

"requesting the masters to pursue a system of short hours rather than to work a portion of the hands overtime while others are compelled to exist upon charity". But, of course, a reserve army of labour, kept at the public expense, helped to keep wages down.

Wages also fell as a result of the use of inferior fibres, which broke more often in both spinning and weaving. In a few instances they were reduced by as much as 50%. even when working full time, by this means. The factory inspectors found minders of self-acting mules who earned only 8s.11d. after 14 days of full employment in 1863 and had their house rent deducted from this; in 1860 the wage had been 11s. 'or six days. Cotton waste was often mixed with inferior fibres from India with consequent reduction of output; yet weavers were expected to weave good cloth from poor yam and were heavily fined if they failed to do so. Fines, which had been 3d. to 6d. on American cotton rose to 1s. - 3s.6d. In one district weavers dropped from four looms to two, yet got only 3s.4d. per loom in 1863 as against 5s.7d. in 1800. One inspector, Mr. Redgrave, pointed out that in some cases wages were so low that it was better to be on relief than employed.

Working conditions and disease

The weavers ascribed the spread of disease to the glue used in the woof of Indian cotton, which was not merely flour size as in the past. This glue was used because it increased the weight of fabrics by one third, - but it also reduced wages by making the yarn brittle with a consequent tenfold increase in the number of breaks. The factory inspectors alleged that there were shirting made for export weighing 8 lbs. a piece of which 2 lbs. was accounted for by glue. "Textiles of other kinds are often given as much as 50% of glue so that the manufacturer does not lie by any means who boasts of becoming a rich man by selling his fabrics at less money per pound than he paid for the yam of which they are made".

Redgrave gives a telling description of working with Indian cotton (Surat). "On opening a bale of cotton there is an intolerable smell, which causes sickness... In the mixing, scribbling and carding rooms, the dust and dirt which are disengaged, irritate the air passages and give rise to coughs and difficulty in breathing. A disease of the skin, no doubt from the irritation of the dirt contained in Surat cotton, also prevails... Bronchitis is more prevalent owing to the dust. Inflammatory sore throat is common from the same cause. Sickness and dyspepsia are produced by the frequent breaking of the weft, when the weaver sucks the weft through the eye of the shuttle".

No wonder Sam Laycock wrote, in the "Surat Weavers' Song."

Confeaud it! aw ne'er were so woven afore,
Mi back's welly brocken, mi fingers are sore;
Aw've bin stanni' an' rootin' among this Shurat,
Till aw'm very near getten as bloint as a bat.

And a Methodist parson, offering a prayer for cotton, qualified it with the words "but not Shurat, O Lord, we pray thee, not Shurat".

"At our mill things are getting worse", John Ward of Clitheroe recorded in his diary in the spring of 1864. "I have given up my odd loom as I cannot keep two looms going, and last week I had only 5/1½ after a very hard week's work, but they have promised us better work as soon as the cotton is done that they have on hand. They have promised so often that we can hardly believe them". But in the 'autumn he is recording: "The weft we have had this last week is worse than ever, but we are forced to put up with it as we don't know how soon we will have to stop altogether".

Unemployment and distress

Bad though conditions were for those employed, they were far worse for the mass of the workers who were thrown out of employment altogether, many for months at a time. The factory inspectors' report for October, 1862, gives only 40,146 (11%) working full-time, 134,767 (33%) on short time and 197,721 (51%) wholly unemployed. Even these figures do not give the full picture since they include Manchester and Bolton, where the finer yams were spun, a line little affected by the crisis. If these areas are excluded, only 8.5% were fully employed and 53.5% unemployed.

By December, 1862, there were close on half a million workers on relief, or 24% of the total population of the districts concerned. In Ashton, however, 42% of the population were on relief, in Preston 48%. Many operatives were reduced to singing on the streets of the larger towns:

War's clamour and civil commotion
Has stagnation brought in its train;
And stoppage brings with it starvation,
So help us some bread to obtain.

A visitor to Preston reported: "In my rambles I was astonished at the dismal succession of destitute homes and the number of struggling owners of little shops, who were watching their stocks sink gradually down to nothing and looking despondingly at the cold approach of pauperism. I was astonished at the strings of dwellings, side by side, stript, more or less, of the commonest household utensils - sometimes crowded, three or four families of decent working people in a cottage of half-a-crown a week rental; sleeping anywhere, on benches or on straw, and afraid to doff their clothes at night because of the cold". *

Similar stories came from all over Lancashire. "A Lancashire Lad" (John Whittaker) wrote in The Times of April 22, 1862: "I cannot pass through a street but I see evidences of deep distress. I cannot sit at home half an hour without having one or more coming to ask for bread to eat. But what comes casually before me is as nothing when compared with that deeper distress which can only be seen by those who seek it.... There have been families who have been so reduced that the only food they have had has been a porridge made of Indian meal. They could not

* J.Watts, Facts of the Cotton Famine, pp. 137-8

"afford oatmeal: and even of their Indian meal porridge they could only afford to have two meals a day".

The Clitheroe weaver, John Ward, explaining why he had not kept his diary for two years wrote, in April, 1864:

"It has been a very poor time for me all the time owing to the American war which seems as far off being settled as ever. The mill I work in was stopped all last winter, during which time I barely kept me alive. When we started work again it was with Surat cotton and a great number of weavers can only mind two looms. We can earn very little. I have not earned a shilling a day this last month and there are many like me. My clothes and bedding is wearing out very fast and I have no means of getting any more, as what wages I get does hardly keep me, after paying rent, rates and firing.... I went thrice to Preston to see my brother Daniel, but him and his family were no better off than myself, having nothing better than Surat to work at, and it is the same all through Lancashire.... The principal reason why I did not take any notes these last two years is because I was sad and weary. One half of the time I was out of work and the other I had to work as hard as ever I wrought in my life and can hardly keep myself living. If things do not mend this summer I will try somewhere else or something else, for I can't go much further with what I am at".

Yet at a time that distress was mounting most of the employers, in their other capacity as landlords, were attempting to exact the last farthing in rents from unemployed workers. Four pages of examples, from all the affected areas, are given in Facts of the Cotton Famine. Only in one small area, Whitworth, near Rochdale, was it the rule "for employers not to collect or ask for cottage rents during the distress". Everywhere else only a small proportion of the arrears was remitted. Thus there were arrears amounting to £8,147 in the parish of Mossley in Ashton, of which £7) was remitted. In Preston one employer whose normal rents totalled £1,427, collected \$962 in 1862, £1,047 in 1863, and £1,176 in 1864, remitting none of the arrears. In Wigan one employer stopped arrears cut of pay when employment recommenced, at so high a rate that it left scarcely anything to live on.

Although the employers were thus exacting their pound of flesh the Central Relief Committee recommended (19.1.63): "No portion of the relief afforded must, in any case, be granted for the payment of rent", thus solving a problem by refusing to admit its existence. But if landlords would not remit rents they could not prevent their tenants from "flitting", nor prevent a decrease as a result of lessened demand. By October, 1863, the factory inspectors' reports state that rents have fallen 25% to 50%; a cottage formerly rented at 3s.6d, a week might be had for 2s.4d.

Organisation of Relief

Relief committees were not set up until 1862 so that at first the workers could only turn to their own resources or the hated Poor Law. Their own funds were much depleted as a result of the wage struggles of the 50's? the long-drawn out strikes at Preston and Colne had proved particularly ruinous and involved workers from all over Lancashire and Cheshire, Deposits at Co-operative Societies were run down at the same time that their sales dropped drastically, and the Savings Banks found themselves faced with large-scale withdrawals. At Preston £17,000 was withdrawn between November, 1861 and May, 1862, and the Self-Acting Mule Spinners Society distributed £700 of its funds amongst its members. In Stockport Savings Bank deposits fell by £10,000 in the same period and sales at the Co-op stores from £600 to £300 a week. Such reserves were, however, far from adequate to meet the crisis. Many workers were reduced, however reluctantly, to begging.

Many others preferred distress and near starvation rather than applying to the hated Poor Law Guardians, who were forbidden in theory to offer relief outside the workhouse and would only give aid after the most searching enquiry into the applicants' means, private life and past record. Usually a "labour test" was insisted upon; no relief was given except in exchange for labour and of the most harsh and degrading kind. H.B.Farrall, who was sent as a special Poor Law Commissioner to Lancashire, suggested the test should be digging in the open fields which was unsuitable enough for workers accustomed to work in heated factories. In Rochdale oakum picking was imposed for a time as a labour test, to be followed later by wool picking. One member of the local Board of Guardians, Mr. Livesay, is reported by the Rochdale Observer (14.6.63) as saying that "he believed the principle to be unsound, tyrannical and unchristian and he most determinedly protested against the application of a felon's task to the honest industrious man who, through misfortune over which he had no control was driven to his present state of pauperism".

Protest to Manchester Board of Guardians

This was a grievance of the workers throughout the crisis, not only against the Poor Law Guardians but also members of the Relief committees who came from the same class background. Because of the rise in the value of the large stocks of cotton and cotton goods on hand at the beginning of the blockade, few cotton mills failed except the small ones- one third of whose owners had started life as operatives. It was therefore upon workers that the burden of distress fell yet they were expected to be grateful for what was parsimoniously given and to accept relief as if it were undeserved.

Needless to say this role was not accepted and protests were common. On June 26, 1862, a mass meeting of operatives was held in Stevenson Square, Manchester, at which Mr. Thomas Evans moved a successful resolution: "That it is unwise and unjust to compel honest working men to perform that kind of labour which common felons are required to perform". He did not object to the "labour test" itself but to that species of labour which degrades a man. He complained

particularly of the method of grinding corn in workhouses. Men set to this work had to do a certain portion in a day but did not see the corn measured before it was put into the mill; neither could they see it while grinding; they were put in a kind of box where they could see nothing but the ceiling and knew nothing of the progress of the work or any trick an unjust overseer might serve them. Another speaker Job Billcliffe of Manchester affirmed that as at present dispensed the poor law was a law to keep the poor, poor. He contended that every man should have pay commensurate with the labour performed; the system at present adopted was to get as much labour out of a man as possible at the cost of the smallest amount of relief, in the shape of money or victuals.

The meeting passed a resolution "that the relief at present given by the Manchester Board of Guardians is totally inadequate to meet the wants of the people in the present crisis". Thomas Evans was deputed to visit the Guardians and was able to get them to agree to a plan, later adopted by some other boards and by many relief committees, whereby the unemployed might attend school in exchange for aid.

The Poor Law, however, depended upon rates levied on householders and businesses, many of them adversely affected by the crisis and all averse to paying more than they felt to be a "fair share". It therefore proved impossible to relieve distress through the Poor Law alone and other measures became necessary. In February, 1862, local relief committees were set up in the worst hit areas - Ashton, Stockport and Preston, followed by others at Blackburn (April), Oldham and Brestwich (May). By August seventeen committees were in being and the number eventually was 170. The Lord Mayor of London set up a central fund in April, 1863 which in two years had raised over half a million pounds.

In Manchester, a meeting called by the lord mayor in the town hall in April, 1862, decided that no relief committee was necessary in the city, but within a month other views had prevailed and a central committee was set up consisting of "men of wealth and influence in the various localities". It is clear that, though many gave donations and served on committees from the highest motives, there were also many who were motivated more by the desire to avoid disturbances on the part of the distressed operatives. These used their influence on the committees to oppose any undue generosity and make the conditions of aid as onerous as possible.

Rochdale Relief Committee

John Bright, who himself came from a millowning family, attended a meeting in Rochdale in January, 1862 of a "committee to help the poor". Criticising the establishment of the committee, he said people should not get the idea they could spend all in periods of prosperity and then go on poor relief. He thought the Board of Guardians and the millowners might make loans to workers to be paid back later. He "could not avoid coming to the conclusion" as the Rochdale Observer (18.1.62) recorded, "that the calling of the meeting was premature". According to the same source there were then 10 or 12 mills closed and the rest on half-time, and some families had little more than 1s. a head a week coming in.

Despite such opposition a fund was opened in Rochdale in February to provide a soup kitchen, though its funds were to be exhausted by May. The Observer printed a recipe for soup: "65 gallons of water, 65 lbs. of beef, 43 lbs. barley, 25 lbs. peas, 10 lbs. oatmeal". This was to be sold at 1d. a quart except to the destitute who were to have it free. On February 8 the paper reported that "the persons presenting themselves for soup had in many instances a very respectable look" and that there were so many applicants that the soup was sold out by 10 a.m.

Later, after a renewed appeal for funds, this committee began to give relief in other forms - to the sum of 3d. per head per week. Resources were difficult to come by. In July, 200 circulars were sent out calling a public meeting but only "20 or 30" replied and not one cotton manufacturer attended. Nevertheless in August up to 8,000 lbs. of bread and oatmeal were being distributed each week.

Discrimination against Co-operative Societies

The Rochdale experience was not untypical. In most areas there were to be found those who were not only unprepared to give themselves but prepared to oppose charity by others, and who used their position on committees to advance their own opinions at the expense of the unemployed. Thus several committees refused aid to members of Co-operative societies unless they drew their last shilling out of the store; others gave tickets for relief which could not be used at Co-op shops. This question was referred to the Central Relief Committee which replied with a lengthy opinion on January 19, 1863. Its general opinion was that relief must be refused to anyone who had any resources at all of his own, but as for members of Co-operative societies: "the utmost...which can fairly be required is that the holder should have mortgaged his share and that he is not at present drawing any pecuniary benefit from it. In such case the holder might fairly be entitled to relief".

This was not the end of the matter. In October, 1864, the Poor Law Board received a letter from the secretary of the Edgeside Holme Co-operative Store, a Mr. Lord, enclosing a relief ticket from Haslingden Board of Guardians marked "this ticket is not available at Co-operative stores". When pressed, the chairman of the Board said that the stores had higher prices than other shops: "as long as the poor people had no more sense than to support the co-op stores they could not expect to be better off. He thought the poor people ought to spend their money in the most economical way; and he was certain that a man with 19/- to spend at the shopkeeper's would make it go as far as 20/- spent at the co-op store". In fact, enquiry in the area showed that prices were not higher at the co-ops which paid a dividend of 2s. to 3s. in the pound. (Watts, pp.82-9).

In these ways the relief committees acted as "watchdogs" for the bourgeoisie, as Marx pointed out, citing evidence from the factory inspectors' report of 1863 to the effect that if a man was offered work and refused it, however low the wages, he was struck from the committee's list. (Capital, vol. iii, 131). Aid, when given, was carefully regulated in order not to harm the pool of labour. An average of 2s. a week per head was arrived at which would provide a quarter to a third of ordinary

wages, according to the size of family. "It was assumed", wrote an observer, "that such a scale...would not materially lessen the inclination for any kind of work for wages, whenever such work was to be had, especially as relief was coupled with what was called 'disciplinary work' which consisted either of out-door labour or of elementary instruction in schools for men and boys, and instruction in sewing schools for women and girls". (Watts, p.200).

Public Works Act 1863

This system was later extended by the Public Works Act of 1863 which made available £1,200,000 (ultimately increased to £1,850,000) to be loaned to local authorities for works of public utility and sanitary improvement within the cotton areas. In fact this money was often misused. Manchester borrowed £135,000 up to November 8, 1863, which was paid to a contractor who only employed 204 distressed operatives. The continuance of this policy, whereby operatives were only employed if first registered as paupers, brought a meeting of protest on October 22, 1864, when the operatives pointed out that public works were largely staffed by regular navvies and not the unemployed cotton workers.

In many areas, however, the money was used on public improvements, of benefit to the capitalist class in that they were carried out at considerably less than the normal cost. The money was borrowed from the Public Works Loans Commission at below the market rate of interest and the wages paid to the workers, based on size of family, ranges from 4s. to 12s. a week. In Blackburn, according to the factory inspector Mr. Redgrave, the men were tried at all kinds of labour in the open air. They dug deep into a heavy clay soil, they did drainage work, broke stones, built roads, made excavations for streets and for canals to a depth of up to twenty feet. They frequently stood in mud and water ten to twelve inches deep in pouring rain. Yet these people were used to working in an almost tropical temperature, by skill rather than strength and at wages double or treble those received.

By the middle of 1864, as the worst of the crisis passed, there were occasional complaints of the lack of labourers, especially in weaving - though low wages may have been the main cause rather than real scarcity as strikes began to be more frequent. Now the Public Work3 Act, so far from keeping the operatives under, was beginning to offer them a little security so that it came under attack from the employers. At Bacup it was alleged that the demand for labourers had so grown that many ex-factory hands were earning 4s. to 5s. a day in the quarries. Accordingly the local relief committee suspended its activities in April, 1864.

Other relief committees followed suit gradually in the succeeding months, bringing to an end what Marx called "this new edition of the Ateliers nationaux of 1848, which had this time been opened in the interests of the bourgeoisie" (op.cit., p. 133). As the Central Relief Committee put it, in a resolution of thanks to C.?*'illiers of the Poor

Law Board (June 2C. 1865) "the advantages derived from the Public Works Act cannot be measured by the amount of employment provided but its indirect influence on the discipline of labour and as a stimulus to the profitable application of capital have exceeded the more direct, and therefore more apparent, benefits derived from it". (Wots, p.303).

Demonstrations at Stalybridge

The attempts to keep relief down to a minimum did not, however, always succeed as smoothly as was intended. Clear evidence comes from the Stalybridge area where relief tended to be above the 2s. average and an attempt was made to cut it down in March, 1863. At the same time the committee decided to give tickets, usable at the local shops, instead of money (allegedly to prevent drunkenness) and to keep one day's money in hand "to help in accountancy". These measures were denounced from the pulpit by the old Chartist leader, the Rev. J.R. Stephens, who displayed a ragged pair of trousers issued by the relief committee to illustrate its parsimony.

The result was a large meeting called by the operatives in the "plantations" on March 19- which adopted a resolution to refuse to attend school if the plan were not changed. (This, of course, was the nearest to strike action that people on relief could take). The next day the workers refused to accept the new tickets and a demonstration followed. There was a march to the mill of the most unpopular member of the committee, a Mr. Bates, when all the windows and some of the machinery were slashed. A police charge resulted in the taking of several prisoners but these were speedily released and the police driven from the fields. The clothing stores of the relief committee were then sacked, as was the shop of one of its members and eventually the central office. By now two companies of hussars had arrived; the Riot Act was read and more arrests made.

Of the 80 people arrested on March 20, 29 were committed for trial at Chester. The next day most of the shops were closed, placards announced that the Riot Act had been read and crowds in the streets were forbidden. Nevertheless the workers assembled outside the police station and when a discharged prisoner appeared he was greeted with cheers. When other prisoners were brought out to be taken in buses to the station the soldiers were showered with stones. Meanwhile a delegation was elected by a mass meeting to go to the mayor and demand relief in cash.

During the evening a running battle developed with police and military, only ending with the bringing in of a company of foot soldiers with fixed bayonets and an additional troop of cavalry. On Monday, March 23, as soon as the schools were open, resolutions to refuse tickets were adopted almost unanimously and, of 1,700 present, only 80 took them. The workers then went out to demand bread from the bakers but were sternly dealt with by the military.

There were similar events in Ashton, Dukinfield and Hyde, while in Stockport and Oldham the workers were only kept down by a large number of special constables who were rapidly sworn in. The sequel was an appeal to the Mansion House Committee in London by the Rev. Floyd. The committee sent £500 to Stalybridge and recommended payment in cash and not in tickets, thus justifying the workers' stand. The Manchester committee refused to give in, even when the Stalybridge committee tried to resign. After a threat to refuse relief entirely, a compromise was reached, mainly to the committee's benefit, whereby the total relief was reduced to 2s. per head to be paid half in tickets and half in cash. (Watts, pp. 262-82).

After this pressure to reduce relief increased elsewhere. By February, though employment had become more difficult, 19,000 fewer persons were relieved than in the previous month. In March, there was a reduction of 9,000 in the number employed but there were still 12,000 less relieved. In Hulme, Salford and Chorlton, members of the local relief committees accused the Central Committee of starving the people. "Whether wholesome or not, this discipline drove a large number of operatives to seek employment in other occupations", records an observer, "the plea of the Central Committee for such severe pressure was -first, to oblige every possible source of independent employment to be tried, so as to prevent men from settling down into permanent pauperism; second, to get the able-bodied men into training for employment under the Public Works Act..." (Watts, pp. 218-20).

Technical Improvements in the Cotton Industry

During all this time there were taking place those "galloping improvements in machinery" which helped to change the structure of the cotton industry, facilitating concentration in larger factories, under fewer capitalists, and reduction in the number of operatives required. Marx gives examples from the reports of the inspectors of factories for 1863 to illustrate a general thesis in Capital (vol. i, pp. 433-5).

A Manchester manufacturer stated: "We formerly had 75 carding engines, now we have 12, doing the same quantity of work... We are doing with fewer hands by 14, at a saving in wages of £10 a week. Our estimated saving in waste is about 10% in the quantity of cotton consumed". In another fine-spinning mill in Manchester an inspector was told that increased speed and the introduction of some self-acting machinery has enabled a reduction of a quarter in the number of operatives in one department, over a half in another. A third spinning mill had made a saving of labour of 10%, a fourth considered its expenditure on new machinery as fully one-third less than in wages and hands while the yarn was much better so that more and cheaper cloth could be made from it.

The reduction of labour on the one hand, increased production on the other, was remarked upon in this report as a general trend which had begun some time since and was continuing. It was also

affecting employment of children. The master of a school near Rochdale told an inspector that there had been a great falling off in the girls' school "not only caused by the distress, but by the changes in machinery in the woollen mills, in consequence of which a reduction of 70 short-timers had taken place".

In all, between 1861 and 1868, the number of spindles increased from 30 millions to 32 millions, the number of power looms decreased but production rose owing to improved machinery; at the same time the number of cotton factories was reduced from 2,887 to 2,549 and the number, of operatives from 450,000 to 400,000. So, Marx noted, the "rapid and persistent progress of machinery" heightened and made permanent "the 'temporary' misery inflicted on the workpeople by the cotton-crisis". In the event the productive capacity so increased and consolidated during the crisis was brought into action immediately after the end of the American civil war and in no time brought a renewed glut in the world market, so that a new cyclical crisis began in 1866-7. Again, notes Marx, the employers resorted to their usual way out of a difficulty, that of reducing wages by 5%. But "the workpeople resisted, and said that the only remedy was to work short time, 4 days a week; and their theory was the correct one. After holding out for some time, the self-elected captains of industry had to make up their minds to short time, with reduced wages in some places, and in others without".

Attitudes to the American Civil War

Meanwhile the Confederate States had been counting upon the sufferings and losses consequent on the stoppage of raw cotton supplies to aid their cause. The strength of Radicalism in Britain was well-known and the Radicals (in particular the Chartists) had always pointed to America as the land of democracy, only marred by slave-owning. However it was thought that the Radicals would be disarmed by the imputation that the North was the author of the distress and that support could be expected from many classes of the population.

This assessment was not far wrong as concerns the ruling class. In 1863, J.M. Sturtevant, president of Illinois College and supporter of Lincoln, toured Britain for three months meeting a number of employers and members of the aristocracy, and took back a very gloomy picture of "the present attitude of England towards the U.S." He found people vaguely sympathetic in general to the anti-slavery aims of the North but yet thinking that the South had the right to secede - as the American colonies had seceded from Britain. At bottom, he felt, such people wanted a divided America because they feared the growth of its commercial power. This attitude was "greatly aggravated by the periodical press, especially the London 'Times' and the 'Saturday Review'. The journals that are in sympathy with American liberty have not the ear of the people". *

* Ha was presumably thinking of the Daily News and Spectator, alone among London publications to stand up for the North. But the provincial press by no means echoed the war cries of the Tines.

Employers did not, however, speak altogether with one voice. Liverpool merchants were eager to retain their imports of slave-grown cotton and set on foot a vigorous agitation for armed intervention on behalf of the South. They also aimed to destroy the rival American merchant marine, built almost entirely in Northern ports. A privateer for the Confederates, the "Alabama" was built at Birkenhead and allowed by the government to set sail. It caused renewed danger of war by inflicting great damage on Northern shipping for which the British people eventually had to pay a large sum in compensation. However, even in Liverpool merchants were aware of the implications of intervention to support the South, and one is quoted by Marx as saying: "Nobody in England dares to recommend war for the sake of mere cotton. It would be cheaper for us to feed the whole of the cotton districts for three years at state expense than to wage war on the United States on their behalf for one year". (The Civil War, p.130).

As for other industries, coal and iron were dependent on orders from the North for munitions and railway construction. So also were the small manufacturers of Birmingham who were largely engaged in arms manufacture, and whose representative in Parliament was John Bright, the most outspoken supporter of the North, both in Parliament and in rousing speeches to the workers. Cobden, influenced by millowners who wanted eliminate competition from New England, and by the fact that the South stood for Free Trade against the protectionist North, at first took up a wavering attitude but was won over by Bright. Among politicians the Liberal Gladstone regarded the Southern States as a nation "rightly struggling to be free", and his zeal on their behalf went further than the Conservative support given by Lords Palmerston and Derby. But Bright put his finger on the fears underlying conservative attitudes when he hammered home the point that if democracy triumphed in America nothing could prevent its triumph in England too.

"Privilege thinks it has a great interest in the contest", he declared in a speech to London trade unionists in March 1863. "It has seen the prosperity of a republic, without aristocracy or State priests. Privilege has shuddered at what might happen to old Europe if this grand experiment should succeed". But you, the workers struggling for your rights, Bright continued, have no such cause for jealousy. In the North "labour is honoured more than elsewhere in the world", in the South "labour is not only not honoured, but it is degraded. The labourer is made a chattel". For those who wish the freedom of their own country the issue is clear. "I have faith in you", he told his hearers. "Impartial history will tell that, when your statesmen were hostile or coldly neutral, when many of your rich men were corrupt, when your press - which ought to have instructed and defended - was mainly written to betray, the fate of a Continent and of its vast population being in peril, you clung to freedom...." (G.M.Trevelyan, Life of John Bright. pp.307-8).

Pro-war agitation was angled by "incidents" between Britain and the North, blown up by the London press. A first was the removal of two Southern envoys from a British ship, the "Trent", by a Northern vessel in November, 1861. This led to loud demands for intervention in defence of the rights of the British flag, which were strongly countered by the

radicals. Congratulating Bright on a speech at Rochdale in December, calling for a policy to give hope to slaves and promote friendship between English-speaking peoples, a United States diplomat - Motley, historian of the Dutch republic - wrote: "I honour you more than I can tell, for your courage in thus standing up, in the midst of the tempest of unreasoning wrath now sweeping over England, to defend not an unpopular but apparently a hated cause". But on another occasion Motley pinpointed the hatred: it was "not to America so much as to democracy in England". (Trevelyan, PP. 313, 304).

By January, 1862, Marx was reporting: "The anti-war movement amongst the English people gains from day to day in energy and extent. Public meetings in the most diverse parts of the country insist on settlement by arbitration of the dispute between England and America. Memoranda in this sense rain on the prime minister, and the independent provincial press is almost unanimous in its opposition to the war cry of the London press". (Civil War, p.130).

Influence of the Working Class

But the point Marx is mainly concerned to bring home is the attitude and influence of the working class in preventing intervention. The misery in manufacturing districts "motivated by the blockade of the slave states" is, he notes "incredible and in daily process of growth... English interference in America has accordingly become a bread-and-butter question for the working class". At the same time the ruling class is using every means to inflame the workers against the North - even Reynolds's Weekly Newspaper, the only workers' journal still in existence and widely circulating "has been purchased expressly in order that for six months it might reiterate weekly... English intervention".

The working class, unrepresented in Parliament, nevertheless "is not without political influence. No important innovation, no decisive measure, has ever been carried through in this country without pressure from without". By this "the Englishman understands great, extra-parliamentary popular demonstrations, which naturally cannot be staged without the lively cooperation of the working class". Of this the working class is aware so that it is "fully-conscious that the government is only waiting for the intervention cry from below, the pressure from without, to put an end to the American blockade and English misery." In these circumstances, Marx concludes, "the obstinacy with which the working class keeps silent, or breaks its silence only to raise its voice against intervention and for the United States is admirable. This is a new, brilliant proof of the indestructible excellence of the English popular masses". (Civil War, pp. 139-41).

The early ad hoc demonstrations were succeeded at the close of 1862 by more formal organisation. In October of that year Lincoln, who had hitherto insisted that the North fought for the Union alone, proclaimed the freedom of slaves in the South and this brought a new response. One meeting was called on the last day of the year by two Manchester working men - J.E.Edwards and E.Hooran - at the Free Trade Hall. Edwards noted in his

speech that a leading article in the Manchester Guardian had been directed to deterring working men from assembling in support of the emancipation of slaves. But the chair was taken by a well-known radical publisher, Abel Heywood, then mayor of Manchester, and the resolution adopted, moved by Edvarde, ran: "that this meeting, recognising the common brotherhood of mankind and the sacred and inalienable right of every human being to personal freedom and equal protection, records its detestation of negro slavery in America".

Having adopted this standpoint the meeting set up a "General Emancipation Society" which in turn adopted an address to be sent to Abraham Lincoln:

"As the citizens of Manchester assembled at the Free Trade Hall we beg to express our fraternal sentiments towards you and your country... We honour you Free States as a particularly happy abode for the working millions whose industry is honoured. One thing alone has in the past lessened our sympathy with your country and our confidence in it, we mean the ascendancy of politicians who not merely maintained negro slavery but desired to extend and root it more firmly. Since we have discerned however that the victory of the Free States in the war which has so severely distressed us as well as afflicted you will strike off the fetters of the slave, you have attracted our warm and earnest sympathy. We joyfully honour you... for many decisive steps towards practically exemplifying your belief in the words of your great founders 'all men are created free and equal'". (Manchester Guardian. 1.1.63).

To this Lincoln himself replied on January 19:

"To the working men of Manchester. I have well understood that the duty of self preservation rests solely with the American people. But I have at the same time been aware that favour or disfavour of foreign Rations might have a material influence in enlarging or prolonging the struggle... I know and deeply deplore the sufferings which the workingmen at Manchester and in all Europe are called to endure in this crisis. It has been often and studiously represented that the attempt to overthrow this government which was built on the foundation of human rights and to substitute for it one which should rest exclusively on the basis of slavery was likely to obtain the favour of Europe. Through the action of disloyal citizens the working men of Europe have been subjected to a severe trial for the purpose of forcing their sanction to that attempt. Under these circumstances I cannot but regard your decisive utterances upon the question as an instance of sublime Christian heroism which has not been surpassed in any age or country".

Not long after the Lancashire workers received proof that the people of the North, in the midst of their own trials, had not forgotten those who were suffering elsewhere. In February, 1863, there docked at Liverpool the first ship carrying provisions - the "George Growald" freighted by a New York merchant of this name. In all, provisions to the value of £27,000 were to be sent and donations in cash of £1,333. When the "George Growald" tied up all the Liverpool men employed at the docks - from customs officials to porters and stevedores - refused payment for their services, while the railways offered free transport. The

captain was presented with an address at a dinner organised by the Manchester Central Relief Committee but he was also welcomed with his officers by a packed meeting at the Free Trade Hall; so great were the crowds that an overflow meeting was held for the 2,000 who could not get in.

Once again a categoric resolution was carried:

"This public meeting desires to express its heartfelt gratitude to the noble donors in America who in the midst of a dire domestic struggle for freedom and nationality have so generously contributed to the succour of the operatives of Lancashire and the meeting declares its conviction that no amount of privation will induce the people of the cotton districts to sanction any recognition of a Confederacy based upon the doctrine that it is right for man to hold property in man". (Manchester Guardian, 25.2.63).

There were "Union and Emancipation Societies" throughout Lancashire by this time, organising enthusiastic meetings in support of the North. On the platforms, side by side with prominent radicals, were working class leaders, many of whom had been active in the Chartist movement.

Ernest Jones addressed a meeting at Ashton on November 16, 1863, when he showed up the hollowness of the claim for "right of secession". He went on: "I fully endorse the 'sacred right of insurrection'. It is not to be lightly used - but on good and adequate grounds insurrection is more than a right, it is a duty.... Working men, I say the South is your enemy - the enemy of your trade, the foe of your freedom, a standing threat to your property...Slave labour is direct aggression on the free labour of the world...the key that shall reopen our closed factories is the sword of the victorious North". (The Slaveholder's War).

A report in the Manchester Guardian (4.5.1863) of a meeting held in June indicates that there was also some organised support for the South. This meeting at the Free Trade Hall was called by ministers of religion from all parts of Britain to support emancipation of the slaves, in response to a suggestion from Protestant clergy in France who had recently done likewise. For days before Manchester was placarded with appeals to the public not to support the meeting, signed by "the executive committee of the Southern Club". Members of the latter were evidently among those in the densely crowded hall for there was heckling, some fighting among the audience and the chanting of slogans and counter-slogans. Towards the close the Guardian reporter himself rose from the press table to make a speech in support of the South but was dragged from the platform and had to be rescued by police. Far from drawing the necessary conclusions the Guardian, in a pompous leading article (5.6.1863) admonished the clergymen for meddling with politics and told them to stick to the pulpit where they belonged.

In the spring of the following year Ernest Jones was at Rochdale addressing a crowded meeting presided over by the mayor. "It is a long time since I last addressed you and those were stormier times than these (cheers and laughter). But I have not forgotten the men of Rochdale, their

"love of freedom and of truth, and I trust that those who are now struggling, honourably and constitutionally, for the freedom of the black will join in every effort for a fresh instalment towards the Charter of an Englishman's liberty. (applause) Those who pat the slave-owners of America on the backs would like to be slave-owners in England too (cheers and hear! hear!)...I trust that we shall find that in establishing liberty universally throughout the American continent we shall be placing the crowning pinnacle on the edifice of freedom here as well". (Rochdale Observer. 13.3.64)

This pressure from without forced the British government to forego recognition of the Confederate states while the United States army was completing their defeat. It was not the wisdom of the ruling class, said Marx, but the heroic resistance of the working class of England to their criminal folly "that saved the West of Europe from plunging headlong into an infamous crusade for the perpetuation and prolongation of slavery on the other side of the Atlantic". These views were echoed by none other than Cobden, in a letter to the United States minister in Copenhagen written shortly before his death:

"Democracy has discovered how very few friends it has in Europe among the ruling class. It has at the same time discovered its own strength and, what is more, this has been discovered by the autocracies and absolutisms of the Old World, so that I think you are more safe than ever against the risks of intervention from this side of the Atlantic. Besides, you must not forget that the working classes of England, who will not always be without direct political power, have always, in spite of their sufferings and the attempt made to mislead them, adhered nobly to the cause of civilisation and freedom". (Rochdale Observer, 5.2.65)

The Wider Outcome

Ernest Jones judged rightly when he saw the mass agitation as a promise not only of American but also of British freedoms. It led on directly to renewed demands for the suffrage, to a mass movement in conjunction with radicals which culminated in the Reform Act of 1867. More than this, the internationalist feeling fostered among the working class played a big part in ensuring the adherence of leading workers to the First International when it was formed in November, 1864, and support for its subsequent work. From this sprang forces which ultimately brought about a revival of socialism in the British labour movement.

B i b l i o g r a p h y

Close examination of contemporary sources, in particular the local newspapers of the cotton towns, is essential before the detailed history of this period can be written. Only a few could be consulted in compiling this account, besides the following works quoted from:

- Reports of H.M. Inspectors of Factories
for October 31; 1861 (London, 1861) p.19
for October 31, 1862 (London, 1863) pp. 18-20
for October 31, 1863 (London, 1864) pp. 63, 42-3
- Marx, K. and Engels, F. The Civil War in the United States (Lawrence & Wishart, 1038)
- " On Colonialism (F.L.P.H., 1960)
- Marx, K. Capital, vol. i (ed. D.Torr, Allen & Unwin, 1946; or F.L.P.H.)
Capital, vol. iii (F.L.P.H.) (or Kerr ed. pp.152-62)
- Sturtevant, J.M. Three Months in Great Britain (1864) (pamphlet)
Letter from Abraham Lincoln (Ashton, 1864) (pamphlet)
- Trevelyan, CM. Life of John Bright (London, 1913)
- Ward, John "The Diary of John Ward of Clitheroe, Weaver, 1860-64"
R.Sharpe France, Transactions of the Historic Society of Lanos & Cheshire. Vol. 105. 1953 (reprinted as pamphlet)
- Watts, J. Facts of the Cotton Famine (1866)

Among other sources the following supply additional information:

- Arnold, R.A. History of the Cotton Famine (1864)
- Greenleaf, J. "British Labour against American Slavery"
Science & Society. vol. xvii, No. 1, 1953
- Henderson, W.O. The Lancashire Cotton Famine, 1861-5
- Waugh, E. Home Life of Lancashire Folk - the Cotton Famine (1868)

OUR HISTORY is published by the Historians Group of the Communist Party. Copies (price 1s.6d.) or subscriptions (price 6s. a year) are available from Central Books, 37 Grays Inn Road, London, W.C.I.