



Last weekend violence erupted in Washington DC after a massive police operation, organised to protect the 'freedom of speech' for members of the Ku Klux Klan. Workers who opposed the march—in a city with a black population of 75%—turned out in their thousands.

The last KKK march in Washington in 1925 saw over 40,000 robed Klan members parading through the streets intimidating and terrorising black workers. Despite the murderous history of the KKK the Reagan administration had allowed the march to go ahead last weekend, the Attorney General ordering the FBI and local police to protect the marchers.

But the anger of workers in Washington was such that only a handful of Klan members, 30, turned up, without the white robes, to be ushered around the city under the protection of thousands of police. Many workers in their frustration and anger at the authorities' connivance with the racists turned their attacks on the police who were protecting the Klan.

Black workers have every justification for their hatred of the KKK and everything it stands for. The KKK have been responsible for thousands of lynchings and murders of black people in America since its inception after the end of the American Civil War, and as these pictures show, such murders were usually committed in full view of the authorities, without any attempt being made to protect blacks or bring the murderers to justice.

## For over three centuries millions of black people have suffered the misery of exploitation under the profit system.

As Karl Marx explained, world capitalism was built on the plunder of the colonies and their peoples. Through slavery, colonial rule, imperialism and racial discrimination, black people have borne the most terrible and inhuman treatment that the world has ever known.

Today, across every continent, in South Africa, in the United States, in Australia and here in Britain, the black working class is continuing the war to end racial injustice.

Black people have a proud history of struggle against racial and class oppression. But it is history which the ruling classes have at all times attempted to bury or distort.

The duty of the socialist movement is to ensure that histories and novels like Howard Fast's 'Freedom Road' are not hidden away on the top shelves but thrust in the hands of black and white workers alike.

'Freedom Road' concerns one of the most glorious and bitter periods in black history. It is a fictionalised account of the events which took place following the liberation of four million black slaves at the end of the American Civil War.

During the war thousands of these slaves deserted the plantations in the Southern States to join the million-strong liberating army from the North. 80,000 free blacks from the North and 125,000 ex-slaves from the South formed the shock troops of the Unionist Army and, in a war in which 600,000 soldiers died and 400,000 were maimed or wounded, blacks had a casualty rate twice as high as their white comrades.

The defeat of the slave-

By Phil Frampton

owners' armies signalled the uprising of the former slaves in the South. No longer in chains, the blacks rose up and destroyed the symbols of their past degradation.

They set fire to the slave-traders' auction blocks, destroyed their masters' whips and smashed the branding irons. They wrecked the churches. After 250 slave rebellions they were free. Thousands seized plots of land and divided up the old plantations amongst themselves.

### Ex-slaves sought to build a democratic society

Two years after the war ended blacks were given the vote. This meant that in one State, South Carolina, blacks won a majority in the convention to draw up the new state constitution.

The central character of 'Freedom Road' is Gideon, one of those ex-slaves elected to fill the State House once occupied by his masters. Just as the Bolsheviks were greeted with derision, then horror, when the ex-slaves took power in Parliament they were met with contempt.

Most of them were virtually illiterate, two-thirds of them were too poor to pay taxes. But they formed the most civilised government in the history of the United States.

The convention abolished

all property qualification for holding public office, established the election of all state officials (judges, police chiefs, etc.) ended imprisonment for debt, and gave women the right to divorce and other rights. They set the state on the road to the break-up of the large landed estates, the desegregation of schooling and the establishment by 1871 of education for 250,000 black children.

But this took place within the context of a democratic capitalist revolution—a revolution to clear away archaic privilege and lay the basis for the growth of an economy dominated by big business and the profit system. Gideon represents many blacks who welcomed this revolution as it destroyed the slave-owners.

However, what Gideon, and his 'creator' Howard Fast, did not see, is that once the slave-owners were smashed and big business was in complete control, that was the end of the unity between blacks and big business. Having installed themselves in power in the South, the capitalists chose their moment and wiped out Gideon, his village, and all the best gains of the revolution.

The previous reforms which had been carried out could not be permanently protected from the hostile interests of big business unless the struggle for land and democratic control was linked to the overthrow of big business throughout the USA. Unfortunately, Fast's narrative does not draw this important conclusion and the equally important lesson that Southern blacks were left isolated and defeated in the South because of the failure of the Northern labour movement to adopt a clear programme to unite blacks with white workers against American capitalism.

The backcloth to reconstruction in the South was the titanic struggle being

waged by workers in the North. White workers and every reason to join together with the blacks to overthrow the employers.

During the civil war the Northern industrialists, so keen to liberate the South, pushed down the workers' wages to intolerable levels. By 1865 real wages were made up by importing 800,000 immigrants and a new law binding all immigrants in debt to servitude. Other laws were introduced, banning strikes and even unions.

Increasingly, strikes broke out during the war. And, while many workers volunteered for the war, they were incensed by Lincoln's draft laws which, in 1863, conscripted into the army all those who could not find \$300 to pay and get someone to replace them in the army.

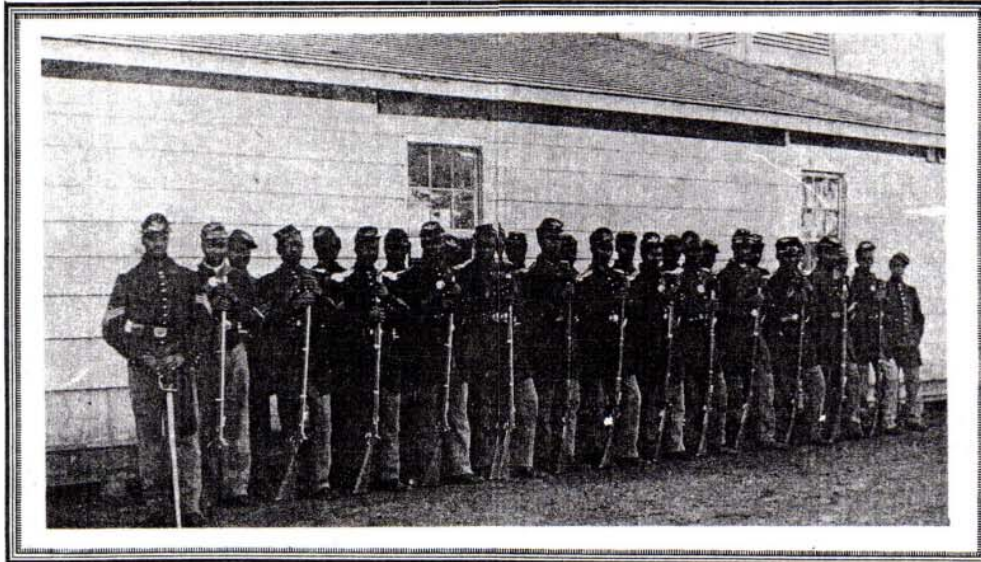
In New York there was an insurrection. For a week the workers took over the city until union troops were recalled from the South to suppress the uprising; 1,000 workers died in the fighting.

William H. Sylvius was one of the brilliant trade union leaders who came out of this period. When the freedom of the slaves was declared in 1863 he said "We are now all one family of slaves together".

### Northern workers engaged in strike struggles

The end of the war, the return of the troops to the factories, and the post-war boom in production only fuelled a new militancy, which sent 600,000 workers into his union federation, the National Labour Union (NLU). As production expanded the American industrial workforce grew from 2 million to 3½ million by 1870. A strike wave swept the country doubling being

# FREEDOM ROAD



Above: Black infantry in US army after the Civil War.

Below: Another innocent black dies by the Southern lynch law in the 1920s.



## American blacks and 'emancipation'

of Northern capitalism. The economic intervention and expansion of Northern industries threatened to ruin their cotton-based, slave society.

Lincoln himself tried to avoid the war. He and the industrialists feared a disruption in trade. In 1861, the thought of liberating slaves never entered into his head. On the contrary, he rebuked any generals who freed slaves in the captured territory.

Lincoln was forced to give the slaves their freedom only because his vacillation allowed the Southern armies to gain the upper hand at the beginning of the war. Faced with the worse prospect of a long drawn out war, Lincoln was forced to use the abolition of slavery to get victory.

When Andrew Johnson succeeded Lincoln as US President in 1865, the new Republican leader first denied blacks the right to vote and then allowed Southern whites to introduce not slavery, but a vicious apartheid-type system of control known as the 'Black Codes'.

### Republicanism tied Southern blacks to capitalism

But the overriding necessity for industrial capitalism to establish its supremacy temporarily cut across the desire of some employers, bankers and merchants to restore blacks to a condition of superexploitation.

The appeasing President Andrew Johnson was first impeached and many of his powers annulled.

Thousands of former Confederate soldiers were banned from voting and the Southern state governments declared illegal. New states would only be recognised where blacks had the right to vote and where the wishes of the North were met.

The black Republican vote secured the domination of industrial capitalism in the South and the country as a whole. In the years that followed, railroads, industry and finance swept into the South. They bought up land, cotton and industry, effectively unified the country and laid the basis for the emergence of the United States as a world power.

Fast's account suggests wrongly that the slaveholders were restored to power at the end of this 'Radical Reconstruction'. In fact, the slaveowners were destroyed by the Civil War.

Howard Fast's 'Freedom Road' relies on the erroneous interpretation of the



Black cavalrymen bringing Confederate prisoners

Reconstruction put about by the Communist Parties under Stalin in the Thirties. Fast, who in 1944 won the Stalin Prize for literature, fell prey to the Stalinist conception that the peasants, workers and blacks should sink their differences with 'liberal' capitalists who would be reliable allies in the fight against reaction and fascism.

Fast, therefore, doesn't show the real difference between Gideon's liberal capitalist 'friend', President Ulysses Grant, and Andrew Johnson—the reactionary. The struggle between Grant and Johnson was over how best to maintain and extend the exploitation of the impoverished classes of the USA. The Stalinist strategy of Popular Frontism, uniting behind sections of the ruling class, proved as disastrous to the workers movements of the Thirties as it was for the blacks under the Reconstruction.

Capitalism's interests temporarily coincided with those of the blacks and the workers in abolishing slavery. However, while fighting alongside other classes such as the capitalists for limited aims, the working class must always organise independently. In developing societies, the capitalist class is continually caught between its need to crush outdated conditions and classes which prevent it going forward, and its compulsion to oppress the very classes which it must call upon to smash the old society.

Once the American Civil War was over and the slaveowners smashed then the real antagonism—between exploited and exploiter—broke out on a fierce scale. In the final analysis, black and proletarian support for the capitalists left them defenceless in the subsequent capitalist political counter-revolution in the South.

Southern blacks did not constitute a working class. They comprised a few hundred thousand city and agricultural workers, but the majority had been transformed into small farmers.

### Legacy of racism bedevilled labour movement

While their interests in owning land totally conflicted with those of the ruling classes, they formed a fragmented class divided by their individual struggles to develop their own private property. Some achieved their common demand for 'Forty Acres and a Mule', others did not.

With one foot in property and the other in the camp of the oppressed, the ex-slaves needed a firm tug from the working class—that class whose toil and daily existence drives it into evermore united and militant struggle against capitalism.

Had the black and white working class given a firm lead, explained that capitalism is the enemy of the poor farmer, and shown a firm resolve to establish a socialist society by eliminating racialism and the economic persecution of small property owners, then the blacks could have been kept out of the treacherous hands of the Republican Party.

Unfortunately Sylvius's Labour Reform party did not explain that genuine land reform could only be consolidated by nationalisation of the banks to provide cheap credit and nationalisation of the cotton trade. Many active trade unionists faced with the rapid development of American capitalism, could not link up the fight for the eight hour day, proper schooling, jobs and equal rights with the need to overthrow big business.

In addition, the legacy of racism bedevilled the movement.

While Sylvius toured the South trying to recruit blacks, he was hindered by the racism of his fellow union leaders. Where blacks responded to the NLU they were blocked by racial prejudice and had to form their own organisation, the Coloured NLU.

The Coloured NLU never rose above being a mere shell of an organisation and along with the NLU was destroyed by the employers' offensive in the terrible recession of 1873. From this time reaction was in full flow North and South.

Even in the South where racism was deepest, the potential to overcome it had been shown. The end of the war found many Southern poor white in the Union Leagues fighting against the landgrabbing slaveowners.

The poor white farmers benefitted from the civil war's destruction of the large estates and by the resulting 50% fall in land prices. Almost one fifth of the Southern whites voted to give blacks civil rights in the 1867 elections.

In 1871, still terrified of the consequences of black and white unity, the New York Tribune printed a letter remarking on the threat of black and white unity and concluding, "Many thoughtful men are apprehensive that the ignorant voters will, in the future, form a party by themselves as dangerous to the interests of society as the communists of France."

In the Paris Commune of 1871, for the first time in

history, workers had seized power for themselves.

The capitalists had to move decisively to break this alliance. It was they therefore who instituted the terror campaign against blacks and white sympathisers which led to the formation of the Klu Klux Klan. As with the fascist blackshirts 50 years later, the employers took the scum of white society and hired them at lucrative rates to terrorise the whites into aiding, or at least ignoring, the fierce suppression of the blacks.

### Reign of terror took away democratic gains of blacks

The only prospect of resistance would have been if the blacks were organised to fight back and able to convince poor whites that they had a common class interest. But black Republican leaders were hitched to a bosses party.

Instead the whites became a crucial tool of reaction. The betrayal of the blacks by the Republicans, left the blacks politically disarmed. Instead of uniting into an army of self-defence and thus a force to go on the offensive against the terror, whole black communities were left isolated.

One by one they were picked off. Whole villages of blacks, like the Carwell family in Freedom Road, were wiped out. The capitalists drowned black emancipation in a frenzy of blood letting.

Had the blacks been able to vote, then they might have sought an alternative. But this too was denied, existing in name only. Blacks were terrorised away from the polls, ballots were fiddled and gerrymandered.

By 1890, only 20% of Mississippi blacks were voting and by 1940 only 2% of blacks in the South voted.

For 100 years a terrible racist terror reigned in the Southern states. Right up to the 1960's blacks were still getting lynched on the whim of rich whites. In the 1890's the Democrats were stringing up more than one black every day.

After a century of racist reaction, the lessons of Reconstruction have still to be absorbed. Trade union leaders still back the big business Democrats and many black leaders have done the same. Blacks have got nothing for it.

Black youth unemployment in the USA today is 50%, adult unemployment at 18%. Discrimination remains rife.

However, in struggle, even Martin Luther King was forced to come to the conclusion that the blacks should form an alliance with the trade union movement. If the efforts of left union leaders to break from support for the big business parties is successful and an independent party of Labor is created, then it will get a tremendous response from not only the blacks but millions of white workers.

This party would be forced to recognise that the only way to end racialism and the capitalist classes' ploy of divide and rule is to get rid of the capitalist class. Only the path of the socialist transformation will put black workers, and white workers, on the real freedom road.