

### Free Labor: The Civil War And The Making Of An American Working Class

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## Review

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**Lause, Mark A.** *Free Labor: The Civil War and the Making of an American Working Class*. University of Illinois Press, \$28.00 ISBN 9780252080869

### From Battlefield to Pickett Line: American Labor Redefined

In *Free Labor: The Civil War and the Making of an American Working Class*, Mark Lause seeks to rectify what he calls an oversight in the history of the Civil War. Neither Civil War historians nor labor historians, he contends, have adequately examined how the war contributed to the making of an American working class. Lause imports to the American setting E. P. Thompson's framework for studying the making of an English working class. The implication of this approach is that it forces Lause to emphasize social class formation as a process where workers identified themselves as a distinct segment of society with unique concerns. Lause suggests that the first years of the war decimated the labor movement. Workers were forced to rebuild in 1863 and 1864, only to run up against the heavy hand of government power in 1864 and 1865. Lause concludes that the Civil War produced an American working class with the central characteristics of pursuing respectability and avoiding mass strikes—tactics that largely excluded African Americans, unskilled immigrants, and women and that guided the labor movement's tactics for decades to come.

Potential readers should not be turned off by Lause's framing of the study as an intervention in the historiography of class formation. This is not a book that is heavy on theory. Nor does Lause use the study as a venue to grind an ideological ax. Instead, it is a history of working people's experiences during the Civil War. Lause organizes the book in four parts that proceed chronologically. He makes clear attempts to be inclusive, which for this topic necessitates addressing the various characteristics of workers—skilled, unskilled, white, black, male, female, native-born, immigrant—and their geographical locations. The nature of economic development meant that most of the union organizing and strike activity occurred in the North, but Lause includes sections on key southern cities

such as Richmond, Nashville, and New Orleans. The breadth of this book—an attempt at a national analysis of the entire war in less than two hundred pages—is one of its strengths and key contributions.

In many ways this is a book written for labor historians, but Civil War historians will find insights and provocative interpretations as well. One of the most compelling aspects of the book is Lause's ability to track a handful of individual workers from the eve of war through the conflict. He shows how they went from the picket lines to the front lines. He places trade unionists in the midst of campaigns and key battles with particular emphasis on Gettysburg. The most interesting example is Alonzo Draper. Draper went from leading the great Lynn shoemakers strike of 1860 to the battlefields of emancipation, commanding the 36th Infantry United States Colored Troops, and connecting antebellum land reform arguments to the importance of land for freed people. While Draper exhibited a continuity of ideas, Civil War experiences had transformative effects for others. Before the war George Washington Beidel, a member of the National Typographical Union (NTU), viewed abolition and blacks negatively. His war experiences purified his prejudice. Before his death in March of 1864, Beidel had come to equate slavery with sin and fraternize with his fellow black comrades. Lause uses examples such as these to show how the war could strengthen unionists' pre-war beliefs in some cases and transform them in others.

In addition to individual experiences, Lause examines the reemergence of the labor movement between 1863 and 1865 that featured the strike wave of 1863 and numerous other workplace actions. Paying greater attention than many previous scholars to these labor conflicts allows Lause to illustrate an important dynamic between the federal government and the citizenry during the war. He argues that the state embraced a new role of arbiter of labor disputes during the last years of the war that would have profound implications on labor relations and the making of the working class in the coming decades. Lause's examination of these strikes contributes to an understanding of the growing power of the federal government and connects to the scholarly project of better understanding the "Long Civil War," as advocated by Aaron Sheehan-Dean.

No look at workers during the Civil War would be complete without a few words on the New York City Draft Riots in 1863. Lause challenges many of the previous interpretations of this event. Too often, he suggests, Civil War historians confine the appearance of workers to these bloody days, which has the effect of ascribing the rage to the entire working class, misconstruing who

participated, and simplifying the causes. The actions of workers varied. Lause suggests that much of the city's workforce did not participate in the mayhem. Some took up defensive positions either in their roles as soldiers in the Union Army or in the NTU-mobilized protection of the offices of the *New York Tribune*. Others denounced the riots as inimical to the republic rather than as effective protests against conscription. A few labor reformers stepped into the fray on the side of African Americans. Instead of viewing the riots as representative of a unified working-class response to conscription and fears of economic competition, Lause urges historians to interpret the violence more complexly and recognize how both political parties shaped the narrative of events that informed later histories.

While the book provides an account of what workers did between 1860 and 1865, we learn relatively little about their motivations, whether in fighting the war or rebuilding their unions, or what they thought about their actions. When Lause discusses Alonzo Draper's leadership of black troops in 1863, for example, he provides no interpretation about the former union leader's motives. More broadly, the concept that provides the title of the book—free labor—receives scant attention. Readers hoping to learn more about what workers thought about free labor or how the ideas associated with it might have motivated them will need to look elsewhere. The absence of sustained analysis of motivations or discussions of free labor from a worker's point of view may be best attributed to sources. Labor historians are constantly frustrated by the paucity of what workers left behind when trying to understand their interior lives, a point Lause acknowledges impacted his work. Overall, this book rests on an impressive body of research, which suggests the silences are more reflective of the sources than disinterest or oversight on the part of the author.

Whereas Lause's key accomplishment in the book is telling a history of the labor movement during the Civil War, he suggests his main purpose is to explain how the Civil War contributed to the "making of an American working class" (x). This purpose fades from view as the chapters unfold. There is a tendency for the author to let the events speak for themselves rather than provide an interpretation that connects events to claims and the claims to a central argument, which is perhaps most noticeable in the chapters devoted to African Americans, unskilled immigrants, and women. This writing style introduces opportunity for the author's key points to be missed or, worse, misinterpreted. Patient readers will be rewarded, however, as Lause brings the key points together toward the end of the book. He concludes that workers' wartime

experiences, participation in strikes, and treatment as objects of government repression created a working class that sought a respectable status that would allow it to achieve its goals through politics. The price of respectability was perpetuating paternalism to marginalize women workers and avoiding using strength in numbers and the mass strike—tactics that had been stigmatized as unworthy of respectable white workers by their association with African Americans and immigrants during the war. Thus, Lause explains how the war created some of the dominant features of the labor movement that emerged from the war and why the skilled white working class sought to distance itself from other workers—a near-mortal wound that would take more than three-quarters of a century to heal, even if then only partially.

Anyone wanting to learn more about how the Civil War impacted the labor movement and how workers experienced the conflict would do well to read this book. It is Lause's tenth book and reflects the work of a scholar who has devoted a career to understanding the Civil War and nineteenth-century United States history. He offers a history of labor's Civil War, and provides an important contribution to labor historians' study of working-class formation.

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