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Free Labor: The Civil War and the Making of an American Working Class by Mark A. Lause (Review)

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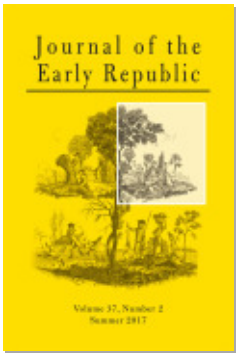

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Free Labor: The Civil War and the Making of an American Working Class. By Mark A. Lause. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2015. Pp. 296. Cloth, $95.00; Paper $28.00.)

Reviewed by Joanne Pope Melish

A curious gap lies at the intersection of labor history and Civil War history. Except for its role in the New York City Draft Riots, labor activism during the war years has received relatively little attention from Civil War historians; while in labor histories, workers have tended to morph into soldiers for the duration of the war, bracketed by their antebellum and post-war labor struggles. Of course, a labor issue—slavery—lies at the heart of the Civil War, but it is treated as such mostly in terms of the labor shortage incurred by slave owners when their slaves decided to become rebels, fugitives, "contrabands," or Union recruits; few have looked at slaves' actions themselves as labor activism. Mark A. Lause has stepped into this breach with a labor history of the Civil War—a detailed examination of the experiences of working people as they resisted, negotiated, exploited, and survived (or not) the war. He attempts to pay careful attention to all categories of workers—North and South, male and female, black and white, native-born and immigrant, free and freeing themselves. His goal is to show how their collective wartime experiences forged a post-war American working class in the Thompsonian sense—"as a process of self-definition through which workers come to see themselves as playing a distinct role in society" (x). Most transformative was the emancipation of four million slaves in the course of the war; what Steven Hahn has called the greatest slave rebellion in American history, Lause characterizes as its biggest and most consequential strike.

The book is organized into four main parts with three chapters in each, along with a prologue and an epilogue. The prologue introduces the various categories of American working people and gives an overview of their efforts to assert their interests, ranging from advocacy of land and labor reform and trade unionism on the part of skilled workers to ad hoc job actions and resistance on the part of slaves. Lause emphasizes the stratification of the workforce, with its great inequalities of working conditions depending on race, gender, and status (as native-born versus immigrant, and free versus enslaved), that made a shared class sensibility impossible at the outset of the war.

The twelve main chapters trace an astonishing crescendo of ever more

militant strikes, riots, and other job actions in both the old crafts and new industrial trades that accompanied worsening economic conditions in both the northern states and the Confederacy as the war went on. Male workers in one occupational category after another organized and struck for higher wages and shorter hours; slaves walked off their jobs in a "rolling strike" (58). A few groups of working women, too, struck over wages, working conditions, and competition brought on by the war; more frequently, however, working women's causes were championed by middle-class advocates stressing workers' essential roles as wives and mothers. While some workers were exempted from military service and others successfully evaded it, many labor activists served, and some died. Lause has painstakingly tracked many of them into and through their enlistments.

Lause argues that the war brought about many changes for working people. First, it taught them to embrace the power of the government to effect fundamental social change, and thus to channel their earlier cooperative impulse through politics. "To a great extent," he suggests, "American socialism grew directly from the experience of the Civil War" (173). But hopes for the triumph of an egalitarian notion of free labor were disappointed. The organizing efforts of women during the war did not transform paternalism. While the war emancipated human beings from enslavement, it also "emancipated race from slavery, making it an issue in itself" for labor as in all other aspects of American life (163).

So, then, did the great upsurge of wartime labor activism create an American working class? Lause argues that at the end of the war, the labor movement still needed to assimilate the very different wartime experiences of disparate kinds of workers in order to forge a common identity; "a new idea of class would have to be reconstructed with the nation" (170). But in his epilogue, he seems to conclude that this "new idea" had not taken shape by 1877. The stumbling block was race. Lause concludes that "what happened to blacks came from the same institutional process that warred on Indians, the humanity of women, and the innately democratic character of the mass strike. Reconstruction did not fail; it succeeded as its real movers and shakers determined it should" (178). (That's probably true, although not necessarily as a result of quite the conspiratorial deliberation that Lause suggests.) A common working-class identity remains unrealized today. Lause argues that in order to "cultivate a more complete construction of workers' self-awareness as a *class*" (implying that some degree of class identity *has* been achieved),

the labor movement must abandon fictions of racial equality and denunciations of earlier modes of black resistance (183).

The amount of research reflected in this book is breathtaking, but the catalog of job actions and leaders' names sometimes overwhelms the narrative thread and the arguments, and it tends to obscure thematic distinctions implied by chapter titles. The narrow focus on strikes and other job actions seems to isolate workers and capitalists, locked in struggle with eyes only for each other, from the larger wartime world around them, leaving some broader questions unanswered. Did workers feel conflicted about withholding their labor, especially in occupations crucial to the war effort, at a time of national crisis? Did their neighbors regard them as traitors? The density of detail also makes the book difficult to read, a problem compounded by a lack of careful copyediting. Readers unfamiliar with the basic timeline of the Civil War will have some trouble placing events in their proper context. But these are relatively minor complaints. By examining the Civil War experiences of workers *as workers*, the effects of the war on work itself, and the resistance of slaves as labor activism, Lause makes a fresh and important contribution to both labor history and Civil War history.

Joanne Pope Melish is associate professor emerita at the University of Kentucky. She is the author of *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780–1860* (Ithaca, NY, 1998) and is currently finishing a book titled *Gradual Alienation: How a Multiracial Laboring Class Formed, Persisted, and Became Invisible in the Post-Revolutionary North*.