The First U.S. General Strike - 1835

The tactic of the general strike first emerged in England where the capitalist overthrow of feudalism occurred earliest in Europe (1640-1660). The industrial revolution was in full swing in England by the early 1800’s. In the United States a proposal for a general strike was first made at the 1835 Convention of the National Trades’ Union. This was the first national labor federation in the U.S., founded in August 1834.

Workers in Boston in 1835 had tried to organize a city-wide general strike for the 10 hour day, but were crushed. Workers in Philadelphia, inspired by the Boston struggle took up the banner. Three hundred armed Irish longshoremen marched through the streets calling workers to join them on strike. Leather workers, printers, carpenters, bricklayers, maids, city employees, bakers, clerks and painters joined in, carrying their tools.

John Ferral, the leading Philadelphia trade unionist, described it: “The blood sucking aristocracy stood aghast; terror stricken they thought the day of retribution had come.”

The strike, at one time outlawed and punished as conspiracy, won recognition over the government of the slave owners over the government of the United States. The northern armies at first repulsed runaways by all means. They even returned them to their plantations. “Black Reconstruction in America” DuBois wrote: “As soon as it became clear that the Union armies would not or could not return fugitive slaves, and that the masters with all their fume and fury were uncertain of victory, the slave entered upon a general strike against slavery .... He ran away to the first place of safety and offered his services to the Federal Army ... this withdrawal and bestowal of his labor decided the war.” [DuBois, p. 57].

The northern armies at first repulsed runaways by all means. They even returned them to southern masters. But nothing could stop the flow. When General Butler began accepting run-away slaves as “contraband of war,” first eight came, then 47 more. Soon they numbered in the thousands. Fort Monroe became known as “Freedom Fort.” “Gradually the fugitives became organized and formed a great labor force for the Army .... as laborers, servants and spies.” [DuBois, p. 65].

DuBois went on: “This was not merely the desire to stop work. It was a strike on a wide basis against the conditions of work. It was a general strike that involved directly in the end perhaps a half million people. They wanted to stop the economy of the plantation system and to do that they left the plantations.” [DuBois, p. 67].

The Union Army put tens of thousands of these fugitives from slavery to work growing crops. After the Emancipation Proclamation “this army of striking labor furnished in time 200,000 Federal soldiers whose evident ability to fight decided the war.” [DuBois, p. 67].