

# Workers' Liberty



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Reason in revolt



The 4th United States Colored Infantry, raised in Maryland, saw extensive action in Virginia and North Carolina during the Civil War

## Revolution for black liberation

**How black soldiers destroyed slavery in the United States, and the betrayal of their struggle shaped today's America**

**A Workers' Liberty supplement for Black History Month 2013 (reprinted January 2014). By Sacha Ismail**

Many people have an idea that slavery in the United States was abolished through the benevolence of white "liberals" such as Abraham Lincoln — but that popular racism made white supremacy afterwards inevitable. The real history is different in many ways.

In the American Civil War of 1861-5, the Southern states very explicitly seceded from the US to protect the right of their ruling class to own African slaves — and 1865 ended with four million slaves freed and a fight for racial equality. Yet later apologists for the Southern side came to argue that the war was not really about slavery. And when it began, that is sort of how it looked. In the first year of the war, the Northern government insisted it would preserve slavery, and Northern generals promised to suppress slave uprisings and returned thousands of runaway slaves to their owners.

But as the conflict unfolded, the logic of the struggle pushed the issue of slavery, and beyond that the rights of black Americans, to the fore. The war and its aftermath, the period known as Reconstruction, have justly been called the Second American Revolution. Although this revolution for freedom and equality was in large part defeated, it is an inspiring story, and rich in lessons.

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**Born into slavery, Harriet Tubman escaped when she was 29. She went on to lead at least nineteen secret rescue missions into the South, helping to liberate more than 300 slaves through the network of activists and safe houses known as the Underground Railroad. Tubman, or “Moses” as she was called, “never lost a passenger”. She helped John Brown recruit forces for his attempted uprising in 1859, and then worked as a spy for the US army during the Civil War. She was the only woman to lead troops during the war, in an armed expedition on the Combahee river in South Carolina which liberated about 700 slaves. After the war, despite severe health problems resulting from beatings and mistreatment, she was active in many struggles including the women’s suffrage movement. She is perhaps the most remarkable figure in a period packed with heroes and heroines**

## How black Americans came to fight

**Black Americans had fought in the American army during the First Revolution, in the 1770s and 80s — the war of independence against Britain. But since 1792, they had been barred by federal law from the state militias; and no black people were allowed in the US army, though black recruits were allowed in the navy. This discrimination was an essential part of the apartheid system under which even free black people in most of the US lived.**

When most of the Southern, slave-holding states broke away to form the Confederacy and the Civil War began, in 1861, thousands of black Americans tried to volunteer for the North. The North was hungry for soldiers, yet black volunteers were turned away! This is how the governor of the Northern state of Ohio put it: “Do you not know... that this is a *white man’s government*; that white men are able to defend and protect it? ... When we want you coloured men we will notify you.”

Anti-slavery activists, who were called “abolitionists”, and the Radical wing of Abraham Lincoln’s Republican Party, denounced this. At this time the Republican party was the more left-wing of the two bourgeois parties; the Democrats were the racist party who, if they supported the war at all, thought it should not touch slavery. Radicals demanded the recruitment of black soldiers and the arming of slaves. But much of Northern public opinion, which was extremely racist, supported the ban.

At the start of the war, hundreds of free black people fought in the Southern army, while none were allowed to fight in the Northern one!

From 1861 into 1862 it looked as if the South might win, and Northern public opinion began to shift. This was because the war had gone on longer than many anticipated; because the South had won a series of victories; and because white volunteering was starting to slow up. It looked as if the British government might recognise the Confederacy and help it win independence — this was before mass meetings and protests by British workers put a stop to this threat.

As pressure built, the radicals became less isolated on a number of issues — including attacks on slavery and the recruitment of black troops. Nonetheless, until the end of 1862 — a year and a half into the war — black recruitment was resisted by the conservative Lincoln government.

## Slaves take up arms

**Government and army policy on escaping slaves shifted during the course of 1861 and 1862. As the Northern army stopped returning escaping slaves, thousands of black people started to work for the Northern war effort as labourers. The flow of fugitives gradually became a flood — this was both a result and a cause of change in Northern policies.**

The first black soldiers were former slaves on the US-occupied sea islands of South Carolina, whom a Northern general, David Hunter, decided to organise somewhat beneath the government’s radar.

Many of the ex-slaves were not very enthusiastic, and when attempts were made to forcibly draft them, it destroyed much of their confidence in the North. Meanwhile, the government, under pressure from the racist right, opposed the scheme and it eventually collapsed.

By the middle of 1862, however, as the Northern war effort got bogged down, Congress became increasingly dominated by the left-wing Radical Republicans. It passed legislation pushing the government to act against slavery. This included repeal of the 1792 ban on black men in state militias, and authorisation of the recruitment of black troops. Still, Lincoln, under pressure from Northern racists and so-called loyal slaveholders in the border states, refused. Opposed to radical social revolution, he also threatened to veto any confiscation of slave-owners’ land in legislation to free slaves. There was talk among the Radical Republicans of removing Lincoln from office.

By the end of August 1862, pressure from the South, from rebelling slaves and from the Radicals was becoming too great to resist. The War Department authorised a new attempt to recruit black troops on the South Carolina sea islands. This time this was done on the basis of volunteers — and white anti-slavery activists who had settled on the islands encouraged ex-slaves to enlist. By November, enough volunteers had come forward to form the First South Carolina Volunteers.

This regiment, as were all black regiments, was commanded by a white colonel. But this colonel, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, was a genuine anti-slavery militant.

Higginson’s politics can be summed up by this statement from him: “The question of slavery is a stern and practical one. Give us the power and we can make a new constitution... How is that power to be obtained? By politics? Never. By revolution, and that alone.”

In 1854, Higginson had been part of a Boston group of black and white activists who, with axes, revolvers and a battering ram, had attempted to rescue a runaway slave called Anthony Burns from being returned to slavery. He had also been one of the key supporters of John Brown, the radical Christian guerrilla fighter executed in 1859 for trying to lead a slave uprising.

Now Higginson found himself where John Brown always wanted to be — leading a black army fighting against slavery.

Black soldiers would often be badly treated, even compared to their white counterparts. In Higginson’s regiment, however, things were different. He prohibited degrading punishments and insults, banned use of the N-word and severely punished anyone caught using it. He won the respect of his troops.

Defying the scepticism of many, the First South Carolina and other black regiments raised towards the end of 1862 to test the waters were a success. To get a sense of what they began to achieve in the South, imagine their capture of the Florida town of Jacksonville in March 1863: black and white troops fighting side by side, black non-commissioned officers leading white soldiers, and former slaves in control of the town of their former masters. This was what an elated Karl Marx called the end of the US Civil War as a “constitutional war” and the beginning of it as a “revolutionary” one.

## Black troops in the North: the 54th Massachusetts

**The first black regiment raised in the North was not mostly made up of recent ex-slaves. It did include ex-slaves, but most of its members were free before the war and many had been born free.**

The Northern state of Massachusetts was one of the cen-

tres of anti-slavery and other forms of radicalism. Its governor, John Andrew, was a friend of Lincoln but leaned more towards the radical wing of the Republicans: he was close to abolitionists and to many black activists. In early 1863 he began the creation of a black regiment in his state. The War Department insisted that the governor abandon his plan to recruit black officers too, though it promised that the black privates would be treated equally to white soldiers. This promise was kept only after a bitter struggle.

Andrew invited the son of his friend Francis Gould Shaw, a wealthy Boston capitalist and anti-slavery activist, to become colonel of the regiment. Robert Gould Shaw was already a captain in the army, but he was only 25.

Shaw was selected partly for military talent but in large part for political reasons. Most of the other officers were abolitionists too. Shaw was not, when he took command, a convinced revolutionary like Higginson. He was anti-slavery but not totally convinced the experiment of black soldiers would succeed. And in fact he turned down the offer to become the 54th’s colonel, before changing his mind shortly afterwards.

By 1863, it was proving harder to get black volunteers than it had been in 1861, when they were being turned away. Partly this was because the booming war-time economy had created new economic opportunities for many black men in the North. Partly it was because of disturbing rumours that black soldiers would after all be paid less. And partly it was because of the insult which the ban on black officers offered to capable and educated black men. Although this ban would weaken during the course of the war, only a hundred black men became commissioned officers by the time it was over.

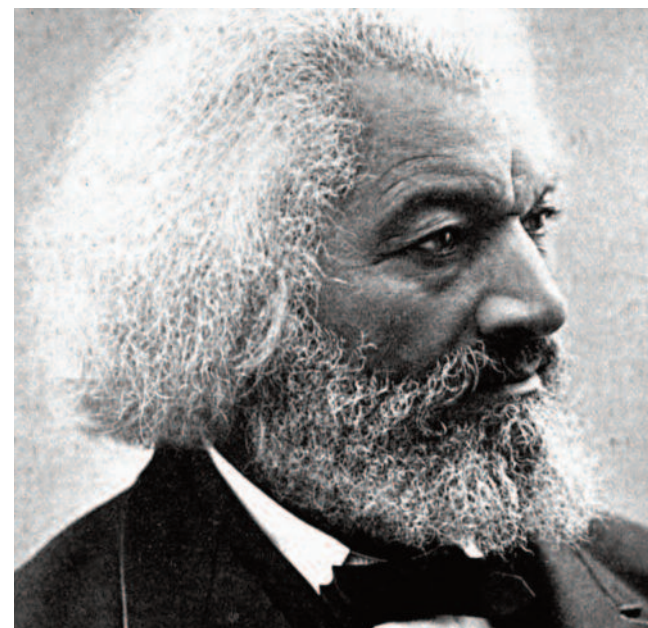
The chance for a commission in a black regiment helped convert many white soldiers to the policy of black troops — but it also produced many racist officers with little regard for the men they led.

All black soldiers were organised in segregated regiments — a policy which some criticised but which was not seriously challenged at the time. The US army would not be desegregated until 1948.

In 1863, the fears of black Americans and their white allies were fulfilled when the government announced that black privates would receive \$10 a month, minus \$3 for clothing — in effect half the pay of white privates, who got \$13 a month plus a \$3.50 clothing allowance.

There was a long battle, from the end of 1862 to March 1865, to overcome this discrimination, including a fight to make equal pay retroactive. The soldiers of the 54th took no pay for 18 months. When the Massachusetts legislature voted to make good the difference with white soldiers’ pay, they continued to refuse because they saw the disparity itself as an insult.

Black soldiers were often subjected to harsher discipline than white ones. When the 54th was formed, it seemed for months that they would not be allowed to fight, but used only for manual labour.



**Frederick Douglass was a slave from Maryland who, after repeated attempts, escaped when he was 20. He spent almost 60 years as one of the US’s outstanding anti-slavery and anti-racist writers and activists, also supporting women’s liberation and other democratic struggles. His sons fought in the 54th Massachusetts**

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Robert Gould Shaw, colonel of the 54th Massachusetts, who died aged 25 leading his troops in battle at Fort Wagner in 1863

Eventually black soldiers were allowed to fight — and some historians argue they were used by the US army as shock troops for the most dangerous engagements. They often carried inferior arms and equipment to white regiments.

In April 1864 the Radical Republican-dominated Congress declared all soldiers equal regardless of colour, arguing for “full recognition of the equality of coloured soldiers... and the destruction of the monstrous and unfounded prejudice against their race”. This resolution cited the heroic record of the 54th in battle, but also their refusal to accept anything less than what was due to them.

## The Confederate response

In early 1863, the Southern government declared that black soldiers taken prisoner would be summarily executed or sent into slavery, and that captured white officers commanding black troops would be killed for “inciting servile insurrection”.

In some cases, this drove black troops to fight harder. Higginson quoted his men: “There’s no flags of truce for us. When the Secesh fights the First South, he fights in earnest.” (Secesh means Secession, i.e. the Confederacy.)

Eventually, in July 1863, the Lincoln administration struck back with an executive order stating that for every Northern prisoner killed in this way, a Southern captive would be executed, and for every soldier enslaved, a Southern one would

be committed to hard labour. Part of the reason for this was the capture of many black soldiers from the 54th at Fort Wagner, which I will explain later.

This stance modified Confederate behaviour — for instance in August 1863 a South Carolina court refused to sell captured soldiers from the 54th into slavery — but there were still instances of murder and enslavement of captured black soldiers. At Fort Pillow, Tennessee, in March 1864, Confederate forces led by future Ku Klux Klan leader Nathan Bedford Forrest massacred hundreds of black soldiers who had surrendered, shooting many in cold blood and burning some of them alive. In part these things continued because Lincoln did not consistently implement his own policy. The US government took no retaliatory action in response to Fort Pillow and Forrest was never charged with any crime.

In addition the Southern government refused to include black prisoners in the system of prisoner exchange between the two sides, leading to a break down of the system.

## “Who would be free themselves must strike the blow”

But despite the danger and despite discrimination, official and unofficial, on their own side, anti-slavery and anti-racist activists both white and black urged black men to enlist and fight.

“Every race has fought for Liberty and its own progress,” Governor Andrew told black people in Massachusetts. “If Southern slavery should fall by the crushing of the Rebellion, and coloured men should have no hand and play no conspicuous part in the task, the result would leave the coloured man a mere helot.” Frederick Douglass, a former slave who was by then the best known black activist in America, and who we saw at the start of this session, became a recruiting campaigner.

Douglass published a speech entitled “Men of Color, to Arms!”, in which he argued: “Liberty won by white men would lack half its lustre. Who would be free themselves must strike the blow. The chance is now given to you to end in a day the bondage of centuries, and to rise in one bound from social degradation to the plane of common equality with all other varieties of men.”

Douglass linked the recruitment of black soldiers to the fight to transform the war into an anti-slavery crusade. He advocated “carrying the war into Africa”. “Let the slaves and free coloured people be called into service, and formed into a liberating army to march into the South and raise the banner of Emancipation among the slaves.”

Determined to make the regiment a success, Douglass and other black and white activists toured Massachusetts and half a dozen other Northern states, as well as Canada, recruiting for it. Douglass’ own sons were the first recruits from New York. Recruitment began slowly but speeded up: by the time the establishment of the 54th was complete, enough black volunteers had come forward to shortly allow the creation of a second Massachusetts regiment, the 55th.

## The cartridge box and the spelling book

An essential part of black soldiers’ experience was a struggle to get educated. In the pre-war South, most black slaves who learned to read were severely punished; those who taught them could face lynch mobs. So slaves and former slaves tended to put a very high value on education.

When the war began, the US government, because it was uncommitted on the future status of black people coming within its lines, made no provision for their education. Churches, abolitionist groups and private freedmen’s aid societies stepped into the gap. Freedmen’s schools, often staffed by teachers from New England, mushroomed all over the South. (In New Orleans, a former slave pen became the Frederick Douglass School!) These schools educated 200,000 ex-slaves during the war alone, and laid the basis for the struggle for a public education system after the war.

Military necessity dictated at least a basic education for black soldiers; regiments whose officers were influenced by abolitionism went further, as explained by the commander of a black Kentucky regiment:

“Instead of drills, a school will be held in each company... Let it be deemed a disgrace for any man, in this Regiment,

to leave the service without, at least, knowing how to read. Every facility will be given in carry out this important work.”

The chaplain of a Louisiana regime commented:

“I am sure that I never witnessed greater eagerness for study; and all, who have examined the writing books and listened to the recitations in the schools, have expressed their astonishment and admiration. A majority of the men seem to regard their books as an indispensable portion of their equipments, and the cartridge box and the spelling book are attached to the same belt.”

All this is part of why former soldiers often became such an important element of political leadership in Southern black communities during Reconstruction.

In these developments the US Civil War was very much like other revolutionary wars. In the Russian Civil War, in which the Russian workers defended their state against counter-revolutionary armies and foreign intervention, the Red Army put a similar emphasis on mainly peasant soldiers learning to read and becoming educated.



A recruiting poster for the 54th Massachusetts – lying to black volunteers about what they would be paid. Black soldiers only won equal pay after a prolonged struggle

In May 1863, recruitment and training completed, the soldiers of the 54th marched through Boston in an official parade, past thousands of cheering white and black supporters. This was a city where two decades before, anti-slavery activists were not safe in the streets, and where less than a decade before, federal troops had been used to return escaped black people to slavery.

What regiments like the First South Carolina and the 54th Massachusetts began spread fast, encouraged by and encouraging the mass escape of slaves (and acts of rebellion by those who did not escape). By the end of the war, 180,000 black soldiers had served, a tenth of the total number of US soldiers in the war, and 18,000 sailors, one fifth. Since black recruitment into the army was allowed only half way through the conflict, the number of black soldiers was even more significant than those figures would suggest — by the last year of the war there were something like 100,000 black soldiers at any one time, one fifth of the total. In the border, but deeply pro-slavery state of Kentucky, 57 percent of black men became soldiers.

Beyond straightforward military considerations, the very presence of black troops helped undermine slavery wherever they went.

## The assault on Fort Wagner

In the summer of 1863, black troops fought major battles at Port Hudson and Milliken’s Bend in Louisiana.

Even more important in shifting Northern opinion, however, was the engagement which made the 54th Massachusetts go down in history. On 16 July the 54th led the assault on Fort Wagner, the huge and heavily armed fort guarding the harbor of Charleston, in the rebel heartland of South Carolina.

Luckily the men of the 54th didn’t know what was happening at the same time in New York. For four days after 13 July, there were racist riots in the city. The riots began with strong elements of working-class protest against draft avoidance by the rich and social injustice more generally. But the dominant political force among these workers was the racist Democratic Party, and the movement quickly degenerated into a blood-soaked pogrom, with the torture, murder, burning and lynching of hundreds of black people. The seven year old nephew of the 54th’s First Sergeant Robert John Simmons was murdered during these riots.

The contrast between brave black soldiers dying for the US and the racist violence in New York gave the Radical Republicans and supporters of black liberation a major boost. First

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of all, it virtually destroyed remaining objections to the use of black troops.

The New York riots were one side of Northern white America. In the operations around Fort Wagner, the 54th met another. Here, for the first time, they had extensive contact with white US soldiers and fought alongside them. The 54th had not slept or eaten properly for days, but their courage and tenacity won admiration and respect. This is how a white soldier from another regiment at Fort Wagner described the 54th's assault on the fort: "But for the bravery of three companies of the Massachusetts Fifty Fourth... our whole regiment would have been captured. They fought like heroes."

Of course many white soldiers were still racist, but many changed their minds about emancipation, black soldiers and even about broader questions of black rights during the war. Soldiers voted overwhelmingly for the Republican Party and often for anti-slavery and anti-racist measures in state referendums.

In the assault on Fort Wagner, the US forces suffered 1,500 casualties. 247 men, 47 percent of the attackers from the 54th, were killed or wounded. So many officers were killed that Luis Emilio, the most junior captain, had to assume command. Colonel Shaw was killed as he led his troops up the fort's ramparts.

The Confederates stripped Shaw's body and, as they described it, "buried him with his niggers". In their racist hatred, they unintentionally honoured him. When the Northern authorities tried to recover his body, Shaw's father insisted it be left where it was, saying: "We hold that a soldier's most appropriate burial place is on the field where he has fallen."

Fort Wagner was never taken, but eventually abandoned by the Confederates. When Charleston was eventually taken by the North, soldiers from the 54th and 55th Massachusetts were part of the victorious army entering the city. And not much later black regiments had become commonplace. In 1864 New York, where not long before black people had dangled from lamp posts, gave its first black regiment a tumultuous send off, with many thousands cheering in the streets, like they had in Boston in 1863.

## The significance of Fort Wagner

**The historian James McPherson is an informative and gripping writer about the Civil War but generally an apologist for Lincoln and a moderate liberal, not a radical of any kind. Nonetheless, his summary of the significance of the attack on Fort Wagner is very much to the point:**

"If in this narrow sense the attack was a failure, in a more profound sense it was a success of historic proportions. The unflinching behaviour of the regiment in the face of an overwhelming hail of lead and iron answered the skeptic's question 'Will the Negro fight?' It demonstrated the manhood and courage of the race to millions of white people in both North and South who had doubted whether black men



**John Brown was a militant abolitionist activist who believed in the Old Testament injunction "an eye for an eye". He led guerilla bands in the mini-civil war which convulsed the new state of Kansas in the late 1850s. Attempting to spark a slave insurrection at Harper's Ferry in Virginia in 1859 ("the first battle of the Civil War"), he was captured and executed, becoming a martyr for the anti-slavery cause**



Still from *Glory*, the 1989 film about the 54th Massachusetts

would stand in combat against the self-styled master race."

McPherson described the role of black soldiers in the struggle to smash slavery as part of a "radical evolution in the scope and purpose of the Civil War".

"This was the most revolutionary feature of a war that wrought a revolutionary transformation of America by freeing four million slaves and uprooting the social structure of half the country. Arms in the hands of slaves had been the nightmare of Southern whites for generations. In 1863, the nightmare came true. It achieved a new dignity, self-respect and militancy for the former slaves who fought for the Union. It helped them achieve equal citizenship and equal rights — for a time — after the war."

## What happened after the war

**The four years of Civil War, 1861 to 1865, were only part of the two-decade long political and social upheaval of the Second American Revolution.**

This revolution began in the 1850s with the beginnings of mass political unrest and violent conflict over slavery — and it did not end until the late 1870s, when white supremacy was forcibly imposed. The most radical phase of the revolution, in which black Americans fought for equal political rights and against exploitation, grew out of the Civil War but only began after the fighting had finished.

After the crushing of the South, during the period of Reconstruction, a massive struggle for the rights of the former slaves took place, alongside a struggle for equal rights in the North. Black soldiers and ex-soldiers were a large part of what made this possible.

In the South, under the protection of occupying Northern forces and organised groups like the Union Leagues, which included many black Civil War veterans, black men — of course all women were disenfranchised at this time — exercised the right to vote and won political office. Many of these black politicians had been free before the war, but many were former slaves. There were thousands of black local officials, black Congressmen and Senators, even one black state Governor.

Civil War veterans played a prominent part in this political struggle, at every level. For instance, First Lieutenant Stephen Atkin Swails of the 54th moved to South Carolina and became a Republican State Senator.

The most dramatic example was Robert Smalls, who had escaped from slavery by daringly piloting a Confederate boat, full of guns and cannon, to the Northern fleet. This ship, the Planter, was used to transport the First South Carolina on their first mission. Smalls became captain of the ship, a South Carolina politician and in 1875 a member of Congress, until he and other black Congressmen were denied their seats in 1886 as part of the defeat of Reconstruction.

Reconstruction was in some ways the most democratic period black Americans have ever known. To give one example students will find interesting — in 1873, more than eighty years before the university desegregation battles which

helped spark the Civil Rights movement, the University of South Carolina enforced desegregation, abolished tuition fees and established access courses for those unable to meet admission requirements.

This struggle for democracy was also a class struggle.

The former slaves used Reconstruction to push demands for state schools, access to public facilities and above all redistribution of the land they worked. They won state schools, the first in the South, though these schools were mostly segregated, and the black ones almost always inferior. (In South Carolina, where there was a black majority, Robert Smalls fought for and won integrated schools; in 1869, Thomas Higginson was thrown out of a Northern schoolboard, in Rhode Island, for demanding an end to school segregation!) But the central struggle, defeat for which would eventually bring about the defeat of Reconstruction, was for land.

The most extreme Northern Radicals supported redistribution of land to ex-slaves and poor whites, believing that democracy could not be secure if a class of whites continued to own the land while a class of blacks were their labourers. But by the 1870s, the US bourgeoisie, including many former Radicals, was moving to the right fast. Having seen off their slave-owning competitors, most of the ruling class were getting sick of their temporary and partial allies, the ex-slaves. Faced with an increasingly restless and class-conscious working class in the North, which in 1877 would explode in mass strikes, it feared that the demand for expropriation of landed property would spark a challenge to other capitalist property as well. (This was a period of rising workers' movements in Europe; the Paris workers had briefly seized power in the Commune of 1871.) In addition, much Southern land was now owned by Northern capitalists and banks.

Racism among white workers and small farmers in both North and South had been partially shaken by the war and Reconstruction. A program of redistributing land to poor Americans, black and white, could have helped drive this process forward. Instead, concerned for order and profits, the ruling class withdrew political and military support from the Reconstruction movement and facilitated a white supremacist counter-revolution across the South.

One by one in the 1870s the Reconstruction governments fell. Slavery was not restored, but most black Americans were denied political rights, legally segregated, murderously repressed and subjected to a vicious system of exploitation. Working people in America were thrown back dramatically — and the work of Reconstruction would have to be attempted again almost a century later in the Civil Rights movements of the 1950s and 60s.

**The story of black soldiers in the American Civil War, and the revolution they fought for, is like the story of the Levellers and Diggers in the English Civil War. It is a story of how capitalism both makes and betrays the promise of freedom. To fully pay homage to these heroes will take a Third American Revolution to open the way to what they wanted: a society remade without exploitation or oppression.**