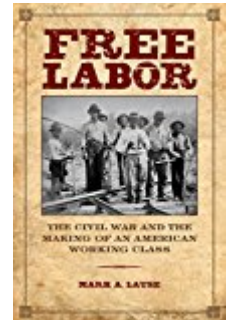


**Mark A. Lause.** *Free Labor: The Civil War and the Making of an American Working Class*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2015. 296 pp. \$28.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-252-08086-9.



**Reviewed by** Paul M. Taillon

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Decades after the advent of the new (and newer) labor history, not to mention the new social history of the Civil War, the history of the American working class during the sectional conflict remains remarkably understudied. Understandably, the central drama of the Union's sun-dering, the clash of armies on a mass scale, the ending of slavery, the social and political recon-struction of the Union, and the agency of enslaved African Americans and freedpeople in shaping these events has captured Civil War-era histori-ans' attention. Labor historians, by contrast, have fleshed out the contours of antebellum workers' workplace, community, and political experi-ence. They have also charted the formation of a permanent union movement in the years during and after Reconstruction. Yet a stubborn disconnect between the ante- and postbellum labor move-ments persists in the scholarship, and our under-standing of workers' contributions to the war and the impact of the war on class formation remains underdeveloped. How did the Civil War shape the American working class and how did American

workers shape the Civil War? Mark Lause's *Free Labor: The Civil War and the Making of an American Working Class* offers long overdue answers to these questions.

Lause begins with a simple contention: the Civil War was central to the making of an American working class. Working in the tradition of E. P. Thompson, Lause approaches "class as a process of self-definition through which workers come to see themselves as playing a distinct role in soci-ety" (p. x). Lause finds evidence of this developing self-definition in the familiar cadences of artisan republicanism as well as in the elastic concept of "free labor." At bottom, though, Lause centers on workers' identity and their conscious prioritiza-tion of solidarity over matters of religion or poli-tics as the yardstick of class. The war, Lause demonstrates, took laboring people through a se-ries of processes that remade the workforce, insti-tuted new and more powerful structures of gov-ernment and employer authority, and complicat-ed the meaning of solidarity.

The war restructured the workforce and labor movement in several ways. In its early years, from 1861 to 1863, the war drew men into armies and combat, swallowing up union memberships North and South. The absence of male workers left behind home front women who contended with worsening working conditions. Union advances into the Confederacy produced a Federal emancipationist policy that sanctioned the movement of hundreds of thousands from slavery (“the largest mass strike in U.S. history to that point,” Lause writes, drawing upon W. E. B. Du Bois) and into the wage-earning workforce (p. xv). Industrial expansion increased the importance of unskilled and immigrant workers, leading to a series of urban-based mass actions and strikes in 1863, including the infamous New York City draft riots. These changes upended the old labor movement and created a new workforce from which a new labor movement began to emerge in 1863 and 1864 as Northern workers rebuilt old unions, formed new ones, and drew them together in new trades assemblies. This process was uneven in the South, but workers in both sections contended with civil authorities and employers who asserted their power to dictate wages and working conditions and quash labor dissent as the war entered its most intense phase. In the end, Union victory resulted in an ambiguous “free labor” political order when it came to worker organization, forcing the postwar labor movement into a circumscribed politics and a strategy of respectability.

This thumbnail sketch only begins to do justice to Lause’s detailed and complex narrative. Lause takes care to document the involvement and contribution of workingmen, unionists in particular, to the war. Indeed, the Civil War may stand as the most working-class of American wars as, building mass armies from scratch, both the Union and the Confederacy relied on existing social institutions like unions to fill out the enlisted ranks and officer corps (conscription did the rest). With men like Isaac J. Neill of the Molders Union and J. Richard Lewellen of the Typographical

Union serving on both sides, “proportionately larger numbers of commissioned officers had associations with the labor movement than had been or would be the case in any American war,” writes Lause (p. 51). Northern workers took up arms because they recognized the importance of the conflict to the future of free labor, but their very dedication to the “free labor” ideal and the Union decimated the prewar labor movement. Workers’ involvement in the war reshaped their perceptions, just as slaves’ “mass strike” remade the meaning of “free labor” itself. At the same time, the turbulent mass strikes of unskilled urban immigrants across 1863 encouraged employers and the press to identify such disorder in ethnic terms as unrespectable and un-American. The attachment of ethnicity to constructions of class dovetailed with the the failure of white workers to extend any meaningful solidarity to black workers and women workers. Lause takes pains to document exceptions to this trend. Nevertheless, a narrowed sense of class identity and practice of solidarity characterized organized labor as unionists and labor reformers built trade unions and political movements, increasingly national in scope, over the latter years of the war.

Ultimately, though, the changed circumstances following the war did not favor workers or their organizations. For state authorities, not to mention employers, labor (black and white, male and female) stood as an object to be managed rather than accorded the full possibilities of “free labor.” Recognizing the riskiness of strikes amidst a rapidly demobilizing military, union leaders like William Sylvis worked out a pragmatic strategy of respectable unionism aimed at winning prolabor legislation and early attempts at arbitration of workplace disputes. In setting out this line of argument, Lause locates the wartime and immediate postwar antecedents of what would later be called “business unionism.” But he also laments labor’s Faustian choice. It was not so much that unionists had other plausible options, for Reconstruction--and its betrayal of the freedpeople--fig-

ured as part of “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” (p. 178). Rather, in buying into Reconstruction’s myth of progress—the conviction that the war had resulted in an expansion of equality and justice alongside the extension of market capitalism—labor leaders paved the way for responsible unionism and foreclosed the democratic possibilities of mass organization and action. For Lause, the historic marginalization of the US labor movement dates to that moment.

Mark Lause brings together Civil War history and labor history in a balanced and fruitful manner. With attention to the experiences and agency of Northern and Southern white workers, immigrants, women, enslaved African Americans, and freedpeople, he illustrates the Civil War as a crucial moment of class formation. (Though, despite his bottom-up approach, Lause tends to amplify the voices of union and labor reform leaders.) Such scope rests on decades’ work in archives, historical societies, and libraries as well as in material available digitally. (Indeed, the challenges of researching Civil War working-class history before the age of the Internet may partially explain why it is only now that we have a book like *Free Labor*.) At the same time, however, the wealth of examples and anecdotes impart a busyness to the narrative that, for all its nuance, can obscure the big ideas. Matters of prose and style further complicate matters, requiring hard work of readers. (The manuscript could have used a good editorial once- or thrice-over.) Nevertheless, *Free Labor: The Civil War and the Making of an American Working Class* stands as a major achievement, filling a huge gap in the literature and revising our understanding of nineteenth-century labor history and the history of the Civil War.

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