

IN NINETEENTH CENTURY BOSTON. *He is currently writing a book on workers and the American Civil War.*

The Politics of Labor and the Labor of Politics

Millington Bergeson-Lockwood

In 1864 George Ruffin, Boston lawyer and the first African American judge in the United States, recorded the “First List of Colored Voters After Emancipation.” Among the list of over 300 names were many of Boston’s better known Black antislavery activists and reformers. The document also listed a significant number of Boston’s Black working class. As an artifact of the early years of emancipation and Reconstruction, it is a reminder of the inseparable relationship between Boston’s Black workers and activists in the struggle for freedom. As Jaqueline Jones shows in *No Right to an Honest Living*, the story of the civil rights fight in Boston is a story about Black labor. “Wage earning,” Jones explains, “was a key signifier of citizenship” (5).

Jones calls historians’ attention to the overemphasis on legislation and legal rights as the battleground of nineteenth century freedom, arguing that this “pervasive focus . . . pushes the inequities associated with wage labor out of sight and into the background” (25). Jones brings Black labor to the forefront and, in doing so, offers not just an in-depth view of Black working-class life, but a rethinking of the boundaries of American citizenship.

Boston is well known as a home to Black and white abolitionists and reformers. These subjects dominate past histories of the city. Although the Black working class appear in more recent studies, Jones is the first to dedicate a full volume to this population. She shows the hidden history obscured by the more popular narratives focusing on Boston’s Black leaders. Jones goes farther to demonstrate how those in so-called respectable occupations could find themselves in precarious financial situations, noting that “the label ‘laborer’ might obscure the true nature of a person’s work,” and mask notable wealth (13).

For Jones, the struggle over Black labor exposes the contradictions at Boston's center. Yet the city so wedded to its image as an egalitarian city on a hill, as a home to white abolitionists who fought against human bondage, did little to challenge what Jones calls "the casual cruelty" of Boston's segregated worksites. "The prevalence of all white workplaces," Jones argues, "calls into question contemporary (and current) claims that [Massachusetts] was uniquely enlightened in terms of granting full citizenship rights to its male residents" (11).

Jones does more than just center workers. She asks readers to rethink the narrative of Boston's Black activism as a working-class story and a struggle over labor and the meaning of citizenship. In doing so, she tightly weaves histories of antislavery activism with lesser-known histories of Black workers' challenges, and then places these efforts within the working-class world. Their struggles for freedom before, during, and after the Civil War reveal disputes over the meaning of Black labor.

Jones sees Boston as a workplace. She provides a narrative of Black workers' lives and experiences from the antebellum decades through the turn of the twentieth century. She describes the early economy of Black Boston and underlines the significance of wage earning to secure safety and independence. Jones brings alive the "world of streets," which "had their own choreography," as longtime residents moved alongside newcomers (106). Fugitives from enslavement and other migrants came to find a new beginning. Jones points out how participation in the abolition movement yielded a way to earn a living. Yet Boston made for a "precarious refuge," with many newcomers relegated to low-paying and unstable employment. In addition to traditional labor, she explores the vice economy, exploring how Black men and women acted as entrepreneurs in illicit or unconventional workplaces.

Civil War calls for justice and military service yielded little tangible progress. When combat halted traditional Boston modes of business, the underground economy survived. The war continued inequalities and "the fight for union widened the divisions between Black and white workers" (196). City officials expanded public works projects and funded assistance to

dependents, but those benefits did not extend to Black residents. Black Bostonians stepped in to fill the gap with mutual aid societies, often taxing their already limited resources.

Jones takes the reader south and looks at Black labor struggles in the aftermath of the Emancipation Proclamation. She investigates the legacies of Black military service, treating the battlefield as a complex workplace. The harshest “fatigue work” that the war effort required was often meted out to Black soldiers, Jones writes, thereby summoning “a higher standard of courage” (256). On the homefront, Black men and women moved into work formerly occupied by white soldiers. Despite the Civil War’s social transformations, most white Americans held onto a vision of Black men and women as laborers.

As Boston celebrated the defeat of the slaveholding south and reformers turned to expanding the civil rights of the formerly enslaved, the suffering of Black residents grew. “The triumphalist narrative [of a new day of freedom],” Jones laments, “had little relevance to labor relations in Boston” (373). Debates over rights and voting especially seized their focus. Workplace discrimination receded from public discourse. Nominal access to rights increased, but few measures were taken to alleviate economic hardship. By century’s end some progress had been made, but Black Bostonians had little to show for it. As Jones concludes: “No one can live by constitutional rights alone” (415).

A significant contribution of Jones’ book is the discussion of partisan politics. Using evidence like Ruffin’s list, she charts how Boston’s Black community, though small in number, engaged in electoral politics. As Ruffin’s evidence shows, Black workers were voters whose interests drove their party affiliations. A crucial element of this engagement was criticism of the two majority parties and advocacy of a Black political future beyond these limited choices. The working class and economically vulnerable of Boston were acutely aware of the limits of American citizenship to provide economic security. They found scant hope in parties that were either openly hostile to Black rights or did little to improve their financial conditions. Jones, for example, notes a writer to a Boston newspaper who

condemned white abolitionists as “quick to condemn southern slaveholders, but silent when it came to the plight of their Black neighbors” (145). During Reconstruction it became clear to many Black workers that support for the Republican Party would not translate into help. Jones notes the irony of the central role that Boston and its white Republicans played in the fight against slavery, while the economic condition of its Black residents stagnated. “The plight of Black workers remained off the table and out of sight in city council meetings,” she observes (385).

By placing Black men and women laborers at the center of the story, Jones provides a rich history of lesser-known actors and offers a reimagining of the entire era. In essence, the struggle against slavery and for civil rights was a struggle to control labor and seize economic opportunity. Black labor, for Jones, is not *one* of the questions facing Boston and the nation, but *the* question. As future historians take up this work, they will learn more about the limits of American freedom—and the lengths that Black men and women went to push its boundaries.

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The Multidimensional History of Black Labor during the Civil War Era

Jacqueline Jones

I would like to thank Paula C. Austin, David Zonderman, and Millington W. Bergeson-Lockwood for their thoughtful comments on my book, *No Right to An Honest Living: The Struggles of Boston's Black Workers in the Civil War Era*. I'd like to respond to those comments and offer some additional reflections.