

Juneteenth

By Mike Curtis

Happy Juneteenth, now a National Holiday in remembrance of the day that the former slaves in Galveston, Texas, were told about the Emancipation Proclamation, the surrender of Lee, and the end of slavery in the 11 states that were the Confederacy.

The radical Republicans, Thaddeus Stevens, and Charles Sumner, promoted the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments to the US Constitution needed to ensure a permanent end of slavery and citizenship for all men throughout the country.

These men wanted to redistribute land in the spirit of “40 acres and a mule.” That was 1/4 the size of most homesteads and family farms. The Northern Army had implemented it to a small degree during the war, and it obviously would have been a monumental foundation of independence and freedom for four million newly freed people. Unfortunately, only a tiny fraction of the former slaves got any land during the war, and most of them eventually lost it.

At the beginning of the war, it had only been 13 years since the United States had conquered Northern Mexico and added a million square miles to the size of the country. Cheap and nearly free land was abundant for the taking, and because of it, wages throughout the United States continued to be the highest in the world. For that reason, slavery was very profitable. The slaves cost little more to maintain than food, clothing, and shelter, and the wages of a few landless white men to guard and whip them. The difference between that and what free men were paid at the time was considerable.

When the war was over, and as long as the federal troops were occupying the southern states, the historical accounts make it seem like the treatment of the former slaves was measurably improved. This lasted about 12 years until President Hays took office and the army was withdrawn. That is when we are told the tyranny became extreme.

Numerous articles and books have been written about the period when there were lynchings and terror brought against the former slaves. Reading about the Black Codes seemed to me a lot like serfdom, where servants were required to pledge their obedience and loyalty, and there was a caste system in which skilled occupations were reserved for white workers. The former slaves were allowed to own land, but with a few exceptions, there was no way for them to acquire it.

At the root of the dilemma, the former slaves had no land, and the KKK and other terrorist organizations made it near impossible to get to any place where they had any chance of getting any—while the depression of 1873 stifled the country for the next five years. The Homestead Act was passed in 1862, and it gave land to four million families, but only 3,500 of those families were former slaves or descendants.

So, despite their freedom and citizenship, the former slaves were right back, where they started working on the master’s land and getting to keep little more of what they produced than the food, clothing, and shelter they had received as chattels. The South remained a semi-feudal society with a black-and-white caste system controlled by large landowners.

Chattel slavery is profitable where wages are high, and land is cheap. How many landowners of the southern states would go back to chattel slavery if they could? Who would buy the workers, guard them, whip them, and when they were sick, take care of them to preserve their investment — when they could be hired nearly as cheap?

For the next 70 years after the end of chattel slavery, the former slaves and their descendants became tenant farmers, sharecroppers, and wage slaves. If they got sick, died, or were no longer needed, the landlord lost nothing; he had no investment in them. Owning highly valuable land is a much more efficient means of taking what other people produce than owning people. And the landowners of the South would not go back to chattel slavery if they could.

The Slave codes required humane treatment of the slaves. Now, the law requires that all workers be paid a Minimum Wage for an eight-hour day in relatively safe conditions. Their employers must contribute to Social Security and Medicare and pay for workman's compensation insurance.

Should anyone be surprised that every measure is taken to ensure that the landless surfs in the former Confederacy do not gain the political power to raise the Minimum Wage, raise taxes to pay for national healthcare and public housing, or allow the workers to organize and negotiate wages and benefits with collective bargaining?

Today, many people are advocating for an increase in the minimum wage, taxing the super-rich, and providing national healthcare and free college.

And if anyone thinks that enough jobs can be created for everyone, black and white, at a livable wage with affordable housing by raising taxes on income and wealth without ending land speculation, they are sadly mistaken.