

May Day: Made in the USA, Exported to the World

One of the most important working-class holidays, May Day (International Workers Day), originated in the United States in the 1880s with the struggle for the eight-hour day.



• A GARLAND FOR MAY DAY 1895 •
• DEDICATED TO THE WORKERS BY WALTER CRANE •

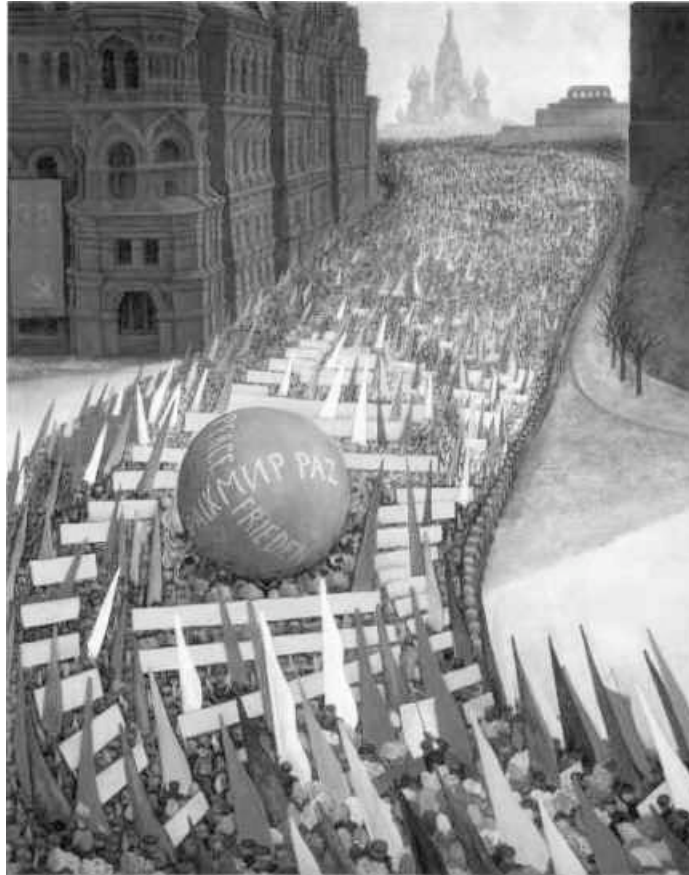
The expansion of capitalism in 19th century America brought new layers of the working class into existence; many were imbued with a strong class hatred of their oppressors. The workers' movement spread from large urban centers to small towns, building new organizations and engaging in militant struggles.

The major labor organization at the time was the Knights of Labor. It was born as a secret society in 1869 but by May 1886 had a membership of over a million. The Knights combined the idea of the need for a class approach to organizing with a moral insistence for good behavior and education.

Their view was an "injury to one is the concern of all." They also believed that wage slavery needed to be done away with and replaced by cooperatives of some kind.

This made them quite different than the American Federation of Labor (founded in 1884 as the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions). The new AFL was based on the skilled labor of white American-born males and was quite narrow in both its approach and its tactics of winning a better life.

Its philosophy was to use strikes by its skilled membership as barter to win from the capitalists "a fair day's work for a fair day's pay." It believed in "pure and simple" trade unionism and turned away from any radical politics.



Diego Rivera's "May Day Procession in Moscow" 1956

A third grouping, that of socialist and anarchist militants opposed to the capitalist system, believed that the overthrow of the system could be accomplished by militant labor action.

The issue of a reduced workweek or shorter daily hours had been a rallying cry for workers both in the United States and around the industrialized world – a struggle against the constant attempt by the bosses to extend the working day up to as much as 16 hours, side by side with periodic unemployment.

Strikes and pressure for legislation to reduce working hours became widespread in the 1880s. An economic depression with resulting unemployment and wage cuts spurred the movement forward so that in 1885 the workers began to discuss the idea of a general strike to win the eight-hour day.

While the national Knights leaders quaked in their boots, the local leaders prepared for the battle. May 1, 1886 was chosen as the date for the fight to be launched. On the job, in the neighborhoods, at the union halls, at home the eight-hour-a-day movement was the hot topic of working-class conversation.

The workers sang the "Eight Hour Song":

*We mean to make things over;
we're tired of toil for naught*

*But bare enough to live on:
never an hour for thought.
We want to feel the sunshine;
we want to smell the flowers;
We're sure that God has willed it,
and we mean to have eight hours.
We're summoning our forces
from shipyard, shop and mill:
Eight hours for work, eight hours for rest,
eight hours for what we will!*

But the bosses were also preparing. There was a huge propaganda campaign by the media, the formation of paramilitary groups, an expansion of the police and national guard, with the obvious threat of major violence.

In early spring 1886, strikes demanding the eight-hour day began to break out, involving almost a quarter of a million workers. The movement was strongest in the big working-class centers, but it extended all over the Midwest and East Coast. In Chicago, a mix of trade unionists, socialists, and anarchists united, holding huge demonstrations in the weeks leading up to May 1.

Mass rallies, parades and demonstrations involving thousands of workers took place around the country. Brewers, bakers, furniture workers, clothing cutters, tobacco, shoe, lard, packing and other workers won some victories and saw their hours reduced.

On May Day, tens of thousands of workers struck and tens of thousands more took to the streets to support the fight. It was a festival of the oppressed, with bands and flags and joy. Over the next days 340,000 workers stopped work in 12,000 work places around the country. Many of the struggles were victorious.



Artist's rendition of the Haymarket bombing, 1886

But on May 3, police in Chicago fired into a mass meeting of workers in front of the huge McCormick works, killing four people and wounding 200. The workers battled the police. Anarchists called on the workers to take up arms. All over the city the workers held meetings and rallies to protest the killings and police brutality.

At a meeting in Haymarket Square on May 4, some 3000 people rallied to protest the McCormick killings; when it started raining, however, many left. As the last speaker was finishing up, hundreds of police marched in and declared that the rally must disperse.

Suddenly, dynamite exploded among the police, wounding dozens and eventually killing seven. The police fired into the crowd, wounding 200 and killing several.

The newspapers all over the country screamed about the bombing, accusing the anarchists of murdering the police. The mayor declared a virtual martial law and the police began raiding all radical organizations, arresting hundreds of socialists, anarchists, and others.

Law and order became the watchword of the day, cheered on by the bosses and their mouthpieces in government, the press, and the police. Even the Chicago Knights of Labor applauded the witch hunt, stating: "We hope the whole gang of [anarchist] outlaws will be blotted from the face of the earth."

Eight anarchists were arrested for the Haymarket bombing. Seven were sentenced to hang and one to a long prison term, though there was not a shred of real evidence to connect them to the bombing. The governor of Illinois commuted the sentences of two of the accused, one man killed himself in jail, and four were hanged by the state.

Twenty-five thousand workers participated in a funeral march for them in Chicago. Thousands of workers made a pilgrimage yearly to the grave of the Haymarket martyrs at Waldheim cemetery in Chicago.

Mother Jones, a leader of the miners, said of Haymarket: "The workers asked only for bread and a



shortening of long hours of toil. The agitators gave them visions. The police gave them clubs."

May Day Demonstration in Moscow, Soviet Union (Russia) 1920

The repression following the strike wave of 1886 led to the demise of the Knights Of Labor. However, the more narrowly focused AFL, whose leaders took credit for the eight-hour-a-day strike victories, gained ground, with over 100,000 members.

In the meantime, the principles of class struggle and labor solidarity were passed along to new generations of labor radicals and led to the creation of the Socialist Party and the International Workers of the World, many of whose militants honored and respected the Haymarket martyrs and the fighters of 1886.

There were over 1400 strikes, involving over half a million workers, in 1886, leading it to be called at the time "the year of the great uprising of labor." The strike wave showed the potential power of the newly emerging industrial working class. It showed a high level of class solidarity, including across racial lines.

In 1888, the AFL continued the eight-hour-a-day movement. In 1889, the Second Socialist International and workers' organizations around the world voted to designate May 1, 1890, as an international day of solidarity to continue the fight for the eight-hour day and to honor workers' struggles.

In the United States, however, while left-wing groups tried to keep May Day alive, the conservative and later anti-communist trade union leadership, with the support of U.S. politicians, tried to shift attention to the first Monday in September as "Labor Day."

Although the September date had been celebrated by trade unionists in New York as early as 1882, in subsequent years it became associated with flag-waving patriotism, parades, and picnics as opposed to the more militant May Day celebrations.

Congress recognized Labor Day as a national holiday in 1894, while ignoring May Day.

As the workers' movement in the United States unfolds in the future, it will be up to us to reclaim May Day as our holiday and bring its celebration back to the U.S. working-class centers where the holiday was born.

Where We Stand

The world we live in today has enormous possibilities -- the potential to open up the most challenging epoch of humanity's existence. We have the prospect of living in a conscious fashion, using all the advances of human knowledge and engaging the creative potential of each person on the planet. Instead we see the world moving in the opposite direction -- increasingly ruled by prejudice and fear, a world of widespread violence and war, where exploitation and oppression are the rule, with the many dominated by the few.

The Force For Change Exists Today

Everywhere, working people's labor makes society run. The exploitation of labor is what generates profits, which are at the heart of capitalism. Working people have the power to bring this system to a halt and bring about the changes needed to transform our lives. Like slavery, feudalism and other systems that enriched the minority at the expense of the majority, capitalism's removal is long over due. The time for socialism has come.

We Stand For Socialism

A world based on peaceful collaboration and international cooperation of working class people -- not the exploiters who rule today.

- The common ownership and sharing of the world's resources and productive capacity under the democratic control of the world's peoples.
- An egalitarian and democratic government, organized and controlled from the bottom up, which facilitates people's active participation in making decisions about how society is run.
- Protection of the world's ecological systems, putting science to work to sustain life, not destroy it.
- A society where human relations are based on respect, equality and dignity of all peoples, not racism, sexism or homophobia.

Our Political Heritage

We base ourselves on the ideas and actions of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky, on the model of the Russian Revolution of 1917 when the working class showed its capacity to take over and exert its power, and on the revolutionary ideas of the Fourth International in its struggles against Stalinism.

We Must Go Beyond Reforms

We support the struggles of those who are fighting against the oppression of capitalism, even if the goals of those struggles are not aimed at replacing the capitalist order. We support the right of people to determine how they will live and to throw off the forces of imperialism -- be it the domination of the corporations, the World Bank, the IMF, military forces or other agents of imperialism. We support the fight against racial and sexual discrimination. We fight against attacks on the standard of living of working people -- wage and benefit cuts, attacks on health care, education, housing and other basic rights.

Socialism cannot come through a modification of the existing system. It is not replacing corrupt politicians or union officials with those who are more honest or who are willing to see more of society's resources shared with the poor. It is not getting better contracts or laws. These systems based on privilege and exploitation must be removed and replaced by one that can guarantee the reorganization of society for the benefit of all.

What Is Needed To Bring This Change About?

It will take a massive social struggle, a revolution, by the majority, the workers and poor of the world, with the working class at its head, taking power in its name and reorganizing society.

It will take the construction of an international revolutionary leadership actively engaged in these struggles.

It will take the development of a party, based in the working class, in the U.S., the richest country of the world, as part of this international leadership. The fate of the world depends on building such an organization, though today it is represented only by individuals or small groups, scattered and marginalized, who share those goals.

The decisions made by a few individuals today, who are ready to start acting on these ideas and who are willing to collaborate with other groups who agree with this program and who are ready to work to implement it, could play a role in determining the future of the world.

If you're interested to find out more, contact us at:

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