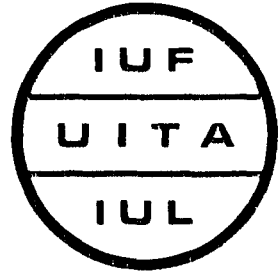


Labour Issues: 4

# May Day

Its Origins

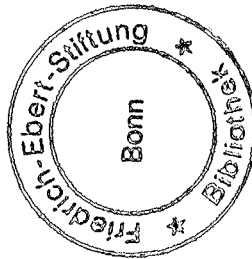


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**Labour Issues: 4**

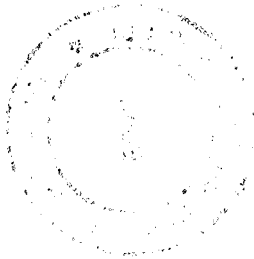
# **May Day**

## **Its Origins**



**Geneva, 1986**

**A 98 - 01014**



**Cover by Walter Crane, 1889**

**© International Union of Food and Allied  
Workers' Associations  
8, rampe du Pont-Rouge  
CH – 1213 Petit-Lancy, Switzerland**

## Introduction

This year the original May Day will be one hundred years old. A century ago, on May 1, the American labour movement declared a day of struggle to launch a national campaign for the eight-hour day. The idea was taken up by the Labour and Socialist International at its congress of 1889 and, as of 1890, May Day became International Labour Day.

The following notes seek to illuminate the significance of May Day for the international labour movement by describing the background of these events.

I am indebted to Marianne Enckell for valuable information and advice.

*Dan Gallin*  
March 1986

## May Day – The Origins

International Labour Day, May 1, originated at the end of the last century in the struggle for shorter working hours. Very rapidly it became a day of struggle of profound significance for workers throughout the world. Its symbolic force comes from its international character. For the first time workers, across national borders, demonstrated on the same day for common demands. Today, despite many attempts to suppress it or to distort its significance, May Day is the day on which the labour movement asserts its identity, its unity and its strength.

In Europe, North and Latin America, Japan and Australia the 1880s were a period of rapidly growing organization and increasing struggles of the labour movement. Many countries experienced their first major strikes. The first strike in Japan was that of the streetcar (tramway) workers of Tokyo in 1882. In 1885, the workers of the Morozov plant, one of the principal industrial enterprises in Moscow, went on strike; in 1886, the French coal miners of Decazeville conducted a long and bitter strike.

From 1884 to 1886, 3,092 strikes took place in the United States, involving 22,000 workplaces and over a million workers. In 1887 the London match girls, organized by Annie Besant, a leading socialist feminist and advocate of the unskilled workers, and the glass workers in Belgium conducted strikes of historical significance for the labour movements of their countries.

Most of these strikes were for the reduction of working time, which, in many industrializing countries, could be as long as 15,

16 or 17 hours a day for a six-day or even seven-day working week.

The eight-hour day had been achieved as early as 1848 in one colonial company in New Zealand and, by the masons, in the Australian state of Victoria in 1855. The demand for the "three eights" (eight hours work, eight hours leisure, eight hours sleep) was raised repeatedly by the International Working Men's Association (the "First International") and had become a widespread demand of unions in a great number of countries.

In the United States, the labour movement had initially attempted to secure a reduction of working hours through legislation, and had been successful in a number of States. Under President Andrew Johnson, a law was passed reducing the hours of federal employees to eight. The implementation of these laws, however, proved to be another matter, and as the working days tended to become longer in practice, the unions began to enforce the eight-hour day through industrial action.

The Federation of Organized Trades and Labour Unions (the forerunner of the American Federation of Labour and the second-largest trade union organization of the 1880s in the US and Canada after the Knights of Labour), at its congress of October 1884, decided to organize a nation-wide campaign of strikes and demonstrations on May 1, 1886, in support of the demand for the eight-hour day.

The Knights of Labour and their leader, Terence V. Powderly, did not support the "Eight Hour Day Movement". In Chicago, however, the Knights of Labour had a radical leadership which refused to follow Powderly's advice and joined the fight, as did socialist organizations in different parts of the United States. Eventually the anarchists did the same, despite initial opposition for reasons of principle (the demand was considered reformist) and of tactics (the form of the campaign was regarded as too legalistic).

In November 1885, Gabriel Edmonston, secretary of the Federation, asked the affiliated organizations to form broad committees (including persons outside of the trade union movement)

to support the campaign, and appealed to individual members to start saving two dollars a week and to buy food supplies before May 1 to be able to hold out. With unity and a reserve of 35 dollars per member, Edmonston concluded, it should be possible to beat the power of capital.

In fact, the campaign started gathering momentum long before May Day. A great many strikes were called in the first months of 1886, particularly in April; by the end of that month, some one hundred and thirty thousand workers had already won the eight-hour day. On May 3, five thousand strikes were in progress in the United States, involving 350,000 workers: not a great number considering that there were 15 million workers in the U.S. at that time, but enough to cause alarm in the establishment.

To break the campaign the employers, supported by local authorities in most cases, resorted to terrorism and provocation. On May 1 police opened fire on a crowd of demonstrators in Milwaukee (at the time a stronghold of German-speaking socialists), killing nine. But the most fateful act of state terrorism was to take place two days later in Chicago, a major industrial center and also a focal point of the confrontation between labour and capital.

## The Haymarket Tragedy

May Day in Chicago had been celebrated peacefully. The unions, in which the anarchists played an influential role, had called a first meeting on April 17, attended by 21,000 workers; a second meeting, on April 25, was addressed by the anarchist leaders Albert Parsons and August Spies, with 25,000 workers participating. On May 1, a procession of forty thousand workers (according to some sources, 80,000) marched peacefully through Chicago's business district, led by Parsons and his wife Lucy. Despite the presence of

1,350 heavily armed National Guardsmen, ready to move against the demonstration from the side streets, there were no incidents.

On May 3, several hundred strikers had gathered near the McCormick agricultural machinery plant (later known as International Harvester) for a meeting held in connection with the May Day campaign. McCormick's had been on strike since February, for reasons entirely unrelated to the eight-hour day campaign, and management had hired scabs to keep operating the plant. The strikers, who had been dismissed, were waiting for the scabs to come out at the end of the shift. The participants of the meeting joined the strikers and the police, arriving ostensibly to protect the scabs, opened fire on the retreating mass, killing six.

The anarchists immediately called for a protest meeting in Haymarket Square for May 4. At the end of the meeting, which had been entirely peaceful, the police charged the dispersing crowd. At that moment, a bomb exploded among the police, killing two policemen immediately and six others who later died of their wounds. The police started shooting at random, killing at least ten people (the exact number was never determined).

The establishment now had its martyrs and its cause: national security. The Haymarket incident triggered off an orchestrated wave of anti-union hysteria throughout the United States, temporarily overshadowing and defeating the eight-hour day campaign. Hundreds of trade unionists, socialists and anarchists were arrested in a nation-wide witchhunt — not the last of its kind.

On May 4, eight anarchist leaders had been arrested in Chicago and indicted for conspiracy to murder the policemen killed in the bomb attack. The prosecution dwelled at length on the inflammatory nature of the articles published by the accused and their associates before May Day, and on the subversive character of the slogans carried by the demonstrators.

Much was made of the fact that the leaflet which called the Haymarket demonstration also called on the workers to "arm yourselves and appear in full force". In fact, one of the accused, August Spies, had demanded that the line be taken out when the



**Attention Workingmen!**

# MASS-MEETING

TO-NIGHT, at 7.30 o'clock,

HAYMARKET, Randolph St, Bet. Desplaines and Halsted.

Good Speakers will be present to denounce the latest atrocious act of the police, the shooting of our fellow-workmen yesterday afternoon.

Workingmen Arm Yourselves and Appear in Full Force!

THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE.

**Achtung, Arbeiter!**

Große

**Massen-Versammlung**

Heute Abend, 7 1/2 Uhr, auf dem

**Heumarkt, Randolph-Straße, zwischen Desplaines, u. Halsted-Str.**

Gute Redner werden den neuesten Scherenschnitt der Polizei, indem sie gestern Nachmittag unsere Brüder erschoss, geklärt.

Arbeiter, bewaffnet Euch und erscheint massenhaft!  
Das Exekutiv-Comité.

**Attention Workingmen!**

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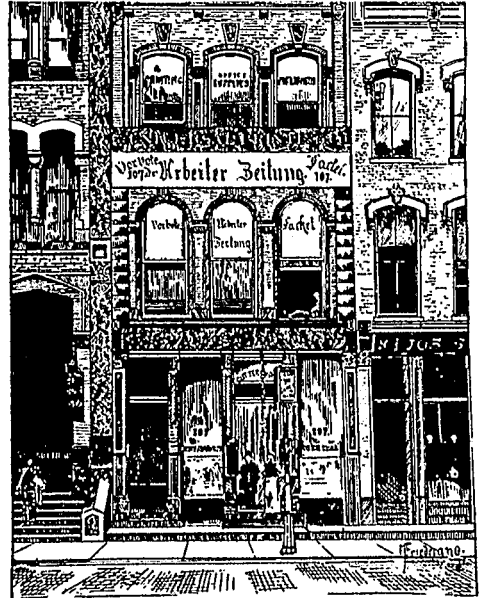
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Das Exekutiv-Comité.



August Spies



THE OFFICE OF THE ARBEITER-ZEITUNG



Albert Parsons



*Lucy E. Parsons*



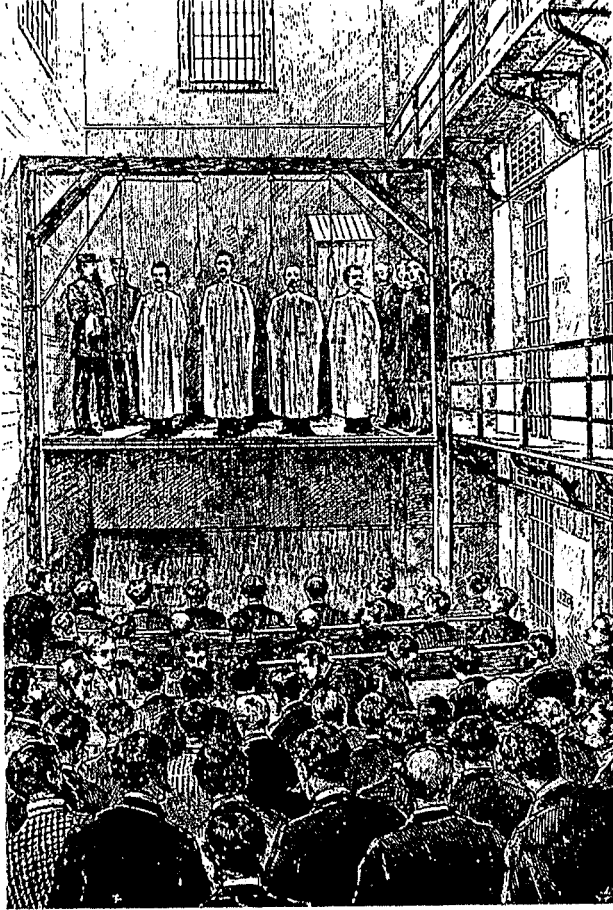
Adolph Fischer



Louis Lingg



George Engel



Samuel Fielden



Michael Schwab



Oscar Neebe



draft was handed to him for printing in the German-language anarchist paper *Arbeiter-Zeitung*, of which he was the editor. He understood the danger of provocation. This was agreed to, but 25,000 handbills including the call to arms had already been printed in another shop. Although instructions were given for their destruction, and a new edition was printed without the incriminating sentence, a few hundred escaped destruction and were distributed together with the rest. These became evidence at the trial.

Although the prosecution was unable to prove that any of the accused had the remotest connection with the bomb explosion that killed the policemen, the jury returned a guilty verdict, carrying with it the death sentence for all the accused. Nobody has ever been able to establish with certainty who threw the bomb: a paid agent provocateur, or an overzealous anarchist who had misinterpreted the directives of his organization or had decided to deliberately overstep them.

A national and international campaign for the revision of the trial was unsuccessful. On November 11, 1887, Albert Parsons, August Spies, Adolph Fischer and George Engel were hanged in the courtyard of the Chicago prison. Louis Lingg committed suicide in his cell. The sentences of Oscar Neebe, Michael Schwab and Samuel Fielden were commuted to life imprisonment. Albert Parsons attempted to address those present at the execution but was cut short by the hangman. August Spies found time to say: *"The day will come when our silence will be more powerful than the voices you are throttling today."*

Six years later, the new liberal governor of Illinois, John Peter Altgeld, pardoned Fielden, Neebe and Schwab. The establishment never forgave him. Bonfield and Schaack, the two police officers organizing and leading the assault at the Haymarket, were thrown out of the police force in 1889 for corruption.

## May Day Becomes International Labour Day

In the meantime, the American Federation of Labour, succeeding the Federation of Trades and Labour Unions, had resumed the struggle for the eight-hour day. At its St. Louis congress of 1888, it decided that the Carpenters' Union would lead the struggle and, with the support of a campaign in which all unions would participate, would demand the introduction of the eight-hour day on May 1, 1890.

On the other side of the Atlantic, the American struggles had caught the attention of the leaders of the socialist and trade union movements. The idea of declaring a specific day as an international day of struggle of the labour movement began to surface at trade union meetings in different countries.

The first motion to declare May Day as an international day of demonstration for labour's demands was made at an international congress held in London in 1888 which is generally ignored by historians because it is only one of several abortive attempts to reconstitute a labour international (after the demise of the First International in 1876), although it can also be seen as a preparatory meeting for the first congress of the Second International the following year. In any event, it was unrepresentative and decided practically nothing.

But it was at that meeting that the Belgian delegate Anseele called on the participating organizations to demonstrate the existence and the strength of the international labour movement in a practical way: on the first Sunday of May 1889, demonstrations for freedom of association should be held in the countries where it existed, in support of the demand that it should be introduced in the countries where it was suppressed. These demonstrations should take place everywhere at the same hour, with the same slogans in all countries. *"Let Britain, Switzerland, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, the United States force their governments to intervene by diplomatic means in favour of workers where*

*freedom of association does not exist*", Anseele concluded.

Later in the congress, Anseele withdrew his motion in favour of a French motion on freedom of association which, however, did not include any reference to May Day and was nothing more than a general call for political and trade union organization, nationally and internationally. There appears to have been some unhappiness when the Belgian delegation reported on the congress at home, and a member of the Brussels labour federation, Pierron, regretted that the resolutions adopted in London did not include provisions for their implementation: "*Congress, after adopting the principle of the reduction of daily working time to eight hours, should have designated May Day 1890 as the date of giving effect to this decision by the workers' associations.*"

Even though it never became a congress decision, the Belgian resolution, six months before the first congress of the reconstituted Labour International, is the earliest recorded proposal to establish May Day as international labour day.

Elsewhere in Europe the same idea was progressing among labour organizations. The congress of the French Trade Union Federation held at Bouscat in November 1888 decided, on the proposal of its secretaries Jean Dormoy and Raymond Lavigne, that on February 10 the following year all unions should make representations to local authorities for the eight-hour day and for a minimum wage. In April 1889, the constitutive congress of the Swedish Social-Democratic Workers' Party decided that "*workers' organizations in Sweden should demonstrate on the same day, throughout the country, to make the ruling class recognize as soon as possible the natural and civil rights of the working class,*" and the Belgian Workers' Party, in May 1889, discussed a proposal by the Metal Workers' Federation to set a date for a one-day general strike in support of the eight-hour day. The following month, at the founding congress of the Miners' International Federation, Keir Hardie proposed a miners' strike for May 1, 1891, in support of the eight-hour day and, after discussion, it was decided that three months before May 1 a special congress should be called to give effect to the proposal.

The Paris congress of 1889, which reconstituted the Labour International, gave the idea its final form. At the end of the congress, the delegate of the Socialist Labour Party of the United States, J.F. Busche, proposed that congress fix a day for an annual demonstration for the reduction of working time. Several possible dates were mentioned. Busche pointed out that the AF of L had already designated May 1, 1890, as a date for a national demonstration and, following him, Lavigne supported the idea. It was therefore generally agreed that May 1 should be the date, and Lavigne introduced the following resolution:

**INTERNATIONAL DEMONSTRATION  
OF MAY 1, 1890**

*“A great international demonstration shall be organized at a fixed date in order that, in all countries and cities at the same time, on the same agreed day, workers should challenge the public authorities to legally reduce the working day to eight hours, and to implement the other resolutions of the Paris International Congress.*

*Considering that a similar demonstration has already been decided upon by the American Federation of Labour for May 1, 1890, at its congress held in St. Louis in December 1888, this date shall be adopted for the international demonstration.*

*The workers of the different countries shall carry out this demonstration according to the conditions imposed upon them by the special situation of their countries.”*

It is unlikely that many delegates were conscious of the import of the resolution they had adopted. In any case, it does not figure prominently in the press reports on the congress, nor in most reports by delegates to their national organizations.

Strictly speaking, the resolution was modest in its aims and flexible as to tactics. The proposed objective was not the proclamation of an International Labour Day: it called for demonstrations on May 1, 1890 and did not say that these demonstrations should become a permanent feature every year thereafter. Although it emphasized the objective of the eight-hour day, it also called for



the implementation of the resolutions of the Paris congress, which of course vastly enlarged the scope of the demonstration. As to the means, the resolution left them to the decisions of the national organizations: "demonstrations" could take many forms, ranging from general strikes to meetings or to a simple public statement. Finally, the resolution said that the workers shall carry out these demonstrations "according to the conditions imposed upon them by the special situation of their countries", taking into account the illegal status of the German Social-Democracy under Bismarck's emergency legislation of 1878, and similar conditions prevailing in Austria-Hungary and several other countries. The Russians had actually voted against the resolution, arguing that it was impossible to implement under the conditions prevailing in Tsarist Russia.

Because the objective of the demonstration was to secure legislation, it was opposed by most anarchists and by conservative trade unionists who, each for their own reasons, did not want to address the State to secure the goals of the labour movement and preferred to rely on direct action in the case of anarchists, on collective bargaining in the case of the trade unionists.

It was only in the course of the preparations for the first May Day that its wider significance emerged, so to speak spontaneously, not least because of the reactions it called forth among the ruling establishment, and it was as a consequence of preparing for May Day that the idea of an International Labour Day began to spread. (It should be noted that Labour Day was already established as a paid holiday in Australia, on April 21, and in several states of the United States, on the first Monday in September.)

## **May Day 1890: The International Shows Its Strength**

In all countries where workers' organizations existed May Day was prepared months and weeks ahead through meetings and publi-

cations. As May Day 1890 fell on a Thursday, a question all organizations had to decide was whether to call a strike or not. Preparations for May Day claimed eleven dead in Austria-Hungary. Over thirty thousand coal miners at Ostrau (now Ostrava, in Czechoslovakia) went on strike in April 1890 because the authorities had seized funds collected for the May Day demonstration. The army occupied the coal fields and opened fire on a demonstration of striking miners.

In France, the army was called out and Paris, as well as the major industrial centers, placed under military occupation. Conservative newspapers branded May Day as a German plot to weaken France's industrial potential, and portrayed Frederick Engels as a conspirator serving the interests of the German General Staff. In Italy and Spain the army was also put on alert. Employers and much of the middle class were seized by the panic fear that the final reckoning was at hand. Employers would send their families to safe places in the countryside, store food and barricade their apartments. In Paris, banks carried their funds to the Bank of France which was turned into a fortified citadel. In Britain, Belgium and Switzerland, neither employers nor governments felt the need for any special concern.

In Germany, the employers' association decided to dismiss and blacklist any worker not reporting for work on May Day and to lock out all enterprises for three weeks where more than two thirds of the workers would be striking on May Day. In Paris, the general manager of the Say sugar refinery (today part of the Beghin-Say corporation) called on the police to "protect his workers from intimidation".

In Britain, a May Day Committee formed by socialist groups and by several trade unions, including the Gas Workers' and General Labourers' Union (the forerunner of the present General, Municipal, Boilermakers and Allied Trade Union) and the Bakers' Union, called for a demonstration on Sunday, May 4. (The socialists wanted the demonstration on Thursday, May 1, which would have implied calling a general strike, but were overruled by the unions.) The London Trades Council a week later decided to also

# A VOZ DO PROLETARIO

Orgão dos Manipuladores de Tabaco e defensor das Classes Obeiras em geral

ASSIGNATURA — PREÇO DE VENDA  
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 Rua da Mouraria, 27, 1.º andar  
 LISBOA

O 1.º DE MAIO — 8 HORAS DE TRABALHO

ANO I

1 DE MAIO DE 1931



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N.º 1

II. Jahrgang. — Nr. 1.

Reinummer. — 10 Cts.

1. Mai 1907.

# Die Vorkämpferin

Offizielles Organ des Schweiz. Arbeiterinnenverbandes, vertritt die Interessen aller arbeitenden Frauen.

Frauen, Arbeiterinnen, Genossinnen! Der 1. Mai ist Feiertag!



Deutschland, 1906

# MUNCA

ORGAN SOCIAL-DEMOCRAT

REDACȚIA ȘI ADMINISTRAȚIA  
BUCUREȘTI, STRADA LIBERȘTEI-VOIA  
Nr. 1. Seabază în juru Miază Noaptea

Sub Direcția Comitetului executiv al „Clubului  
Muncitorilor”

ABONAMENTUL  
Pe un an în avans .....  
Pe șase luni .....  
Pe o dată pe săptămână .....

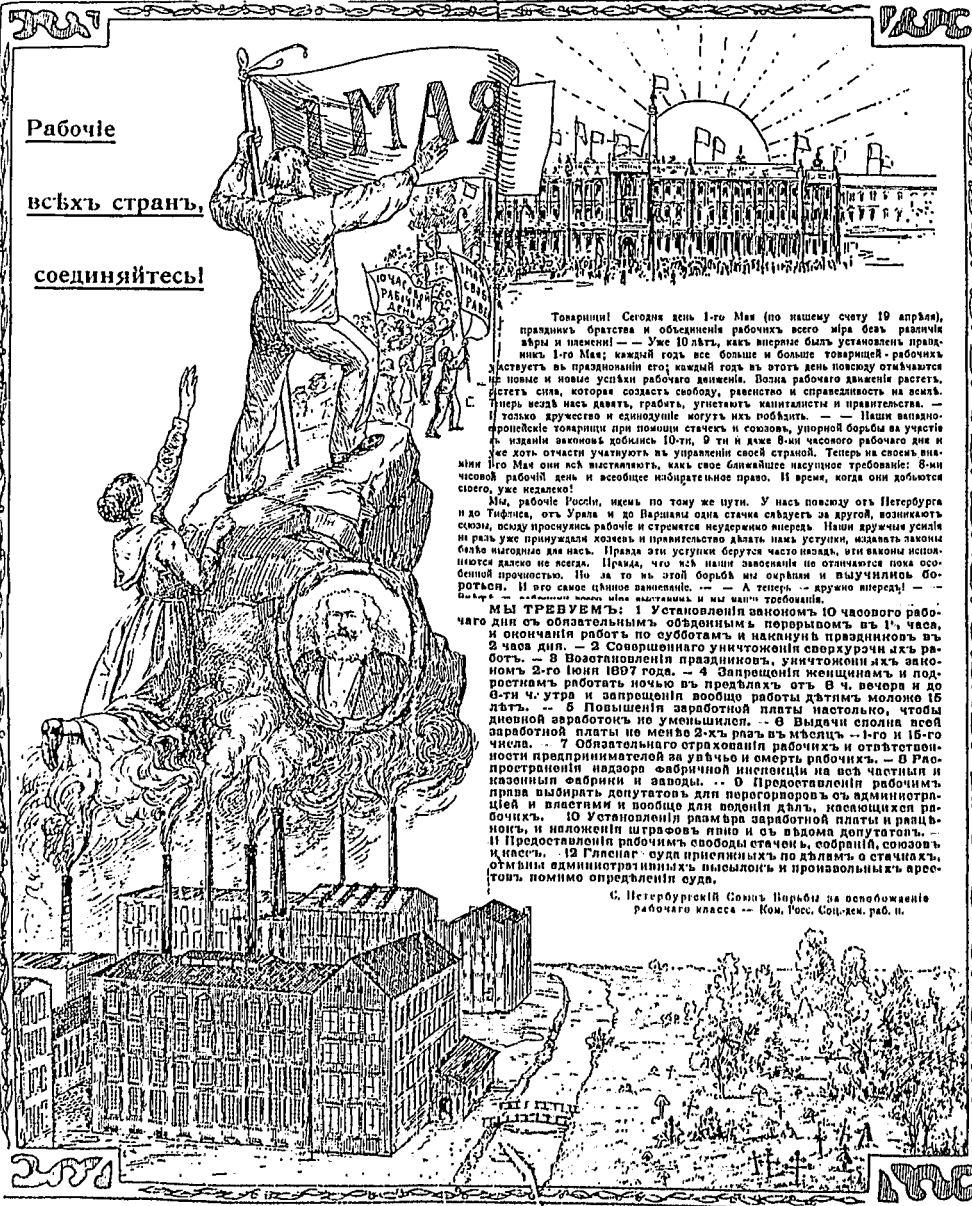


DECI DOCAȚI VEMERNICI, CE STĂPÎNIȚI POPORUL  
ȘI FACȚA LIBERȚĂȚII, ȘI STĂNCEȚI ÎNCERCĂȚI.  
- ADAR ÎNCEA VI E MUNCĂ, ȘI MULȚ ZADARNIC DORUL  
O'LIJECI AI NOPTEI, ÎN NOȚTE REÎNȚRAȚI!

Рабочие

всѣхъ странъ,

соединяйтесь!



Товарищи! Сегодня день 1-го Мая (по нашему счету 19 апреля), праздникъ братства и объединенія рабочихъ всего мира, разныхъ языковъ и племенъ! — Уже 10 лѣтъ, какъ впервые былъ установленъ праздникъ 1-го Мая; каждый годъ все больше и больше товарищей-рабочихъ участвуетъ въ празднованіи его; каждый годъ въ этотъ день повсюду отъзвучиваются новые и новые успехи рабочего движенія. Во имя рабочего движенія растётъ, крепнетъ сила, которая создастъ свободу, равенство и справедливость на землѣ. Теперь неждъ насъ давить, грабить, угнетать капиталисты и правительства. — Только кружество и единодушіе могутъ ихъ побѣдить. — Наши взаимно-проблемные товарищи при помощи стачекъ и союзовъ, упорной борьбы въ участіе изданныхъ законовъ добились 10-ти, 9-ти и даже 8-ми часового рабочаго дня и уже хотѣли участвовать въ управленіи своей страной. Теперь на словахъ винимъ 1-го Мая они всѣ настаиваютъ, какъ свое ближайшее насущное требованіе: 8-ми часовая рабочая день и всеобщее избирательное право. И время, когда они добьются этого, уже близко!

Мы, рабочие Россіи, имѣемъ по тому же пути. У насъ повсюду отъ Петербурга и до Тифлиса, отъ Урала и до Варшавы одна стачка сдвигаетъ за другой, возникаетъ союзъ, осмуд проснулись рабочие и стремятся неудержимо впередъ. Наши дружные успехи и рядъ уже принятыхъ законовъ и постановленій дадутъ намъ успехи, сделать законы были выгодные для насъ. Правда эти успехи берутъ начало издавъ, эти законы исполняются далеко не всегда. Правда, что всѣ наши законныя не отменяются пока особенной прочностью. Но за то въ этой борьбѣ мы окрепимъ и выучимся бороться. И это самое главное достиженіе. — А теперь, — дружно впередъ! —

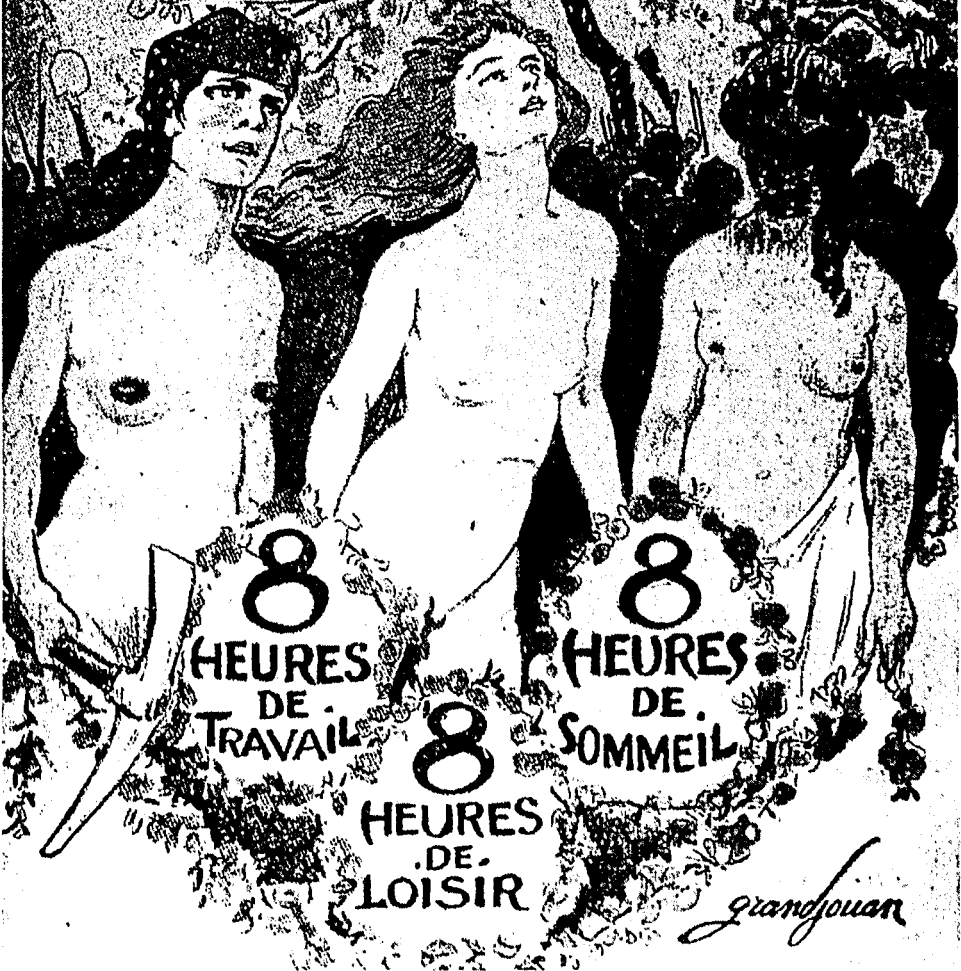
**МЫ ТРЕБУЕМЪ:** 1 Установленія закономъ 10 часового рабочаго дня съ обязательнымъ свободнымъ попятываніемъ въ 1 1/2 часа, и освобожденія рабочихъ по субботамъ и накануне праздниковъ въ 2 часа дня. — 2 Совершенного уничтоженія слободныхъ и нѣтъ работъ. — 3 Возстановленія праздниковъ, уничтоженіи какъ закономъ 2-го Юнія 1897 года. — 4 Запрощенія женщинамъ и подросткамъ работать ночью въ предѣлахъ отъ 8 в. вечера и до 6-ти утра и запрещенія вообще работы дѣтскимъ молокомъ 16 лѣтъ. — 5 Повышенія заработной платы настолько, чтобы дневной заработокъ не уменьшился. — 6 Выдачи сполна всей заработной платы не менѣе 2-хъ разъ въ мѣсяцъ. — 7 и 16-го числа. — 7 Обязанности отряженія рабочихъ и ответственности предпринимателей за увѣчье и смерть рабочихъ. — 8 Распространенія надзора фабричной инспекціи на всѣ частныя и казенныя фабрики и заводы. — 9 Предоставленія рабочимъ права выбирать депутатовъ для переговоровъ съ администраціей и властями и вообще для поведенія дѣлъ, касающихся рабочихъ. — 10 Установленія равнѣра заработной платы и равенства, и наложенія штрафовъ ни на и съ вѣдома депутатовъ. — 11 Предоставленія рабочимъ свободы стачекъ, союзовъ и нѣтъ. — 12 Гласнаго суда присяжныхъ по вѣдѣнію стачечныхъ, отмени администраціиныхъ высылки и произвольныхъ арестовъ, номіно опредѣленія суда.

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PARIS  
1899 210 14

*L'assiette au beurre*

# Normai



Paris, 1906

# \*\* 1° DE MAYO \*\*

ÓRGANO DE LA SOCIEDAD DE RESISTENCIA "OBREROS DEL PUERTO DE LA CAPITAL"

SECRETARIA: AYOLAS 23 (BOCA)



En una carrera loca, desenfrenada, se diría la macabra carrera de espíritus que cubren el fondo estrujamiento del espacio, resbalan por la pendiente del siglo, que es siglo de revancha, los tristes negadores de la vida. Acostumbrados a las sombras, el mal los ofusca. Cultores de la Mentira, la Verdad los ciega.... Y se lanzan peñas abajo en un rodar infernal de algo que debe morir inevitablemente envuelto en la ola montante de la Ciencia... Cadenas que se rompen, fulgurancias que sonríen... Hay en los aires una como brava nota de triunfalés Marseillesas. Y en el caldeado Oriente de la vida proletaria tocan una augusta apoteosis de Concordia y de Justicia.



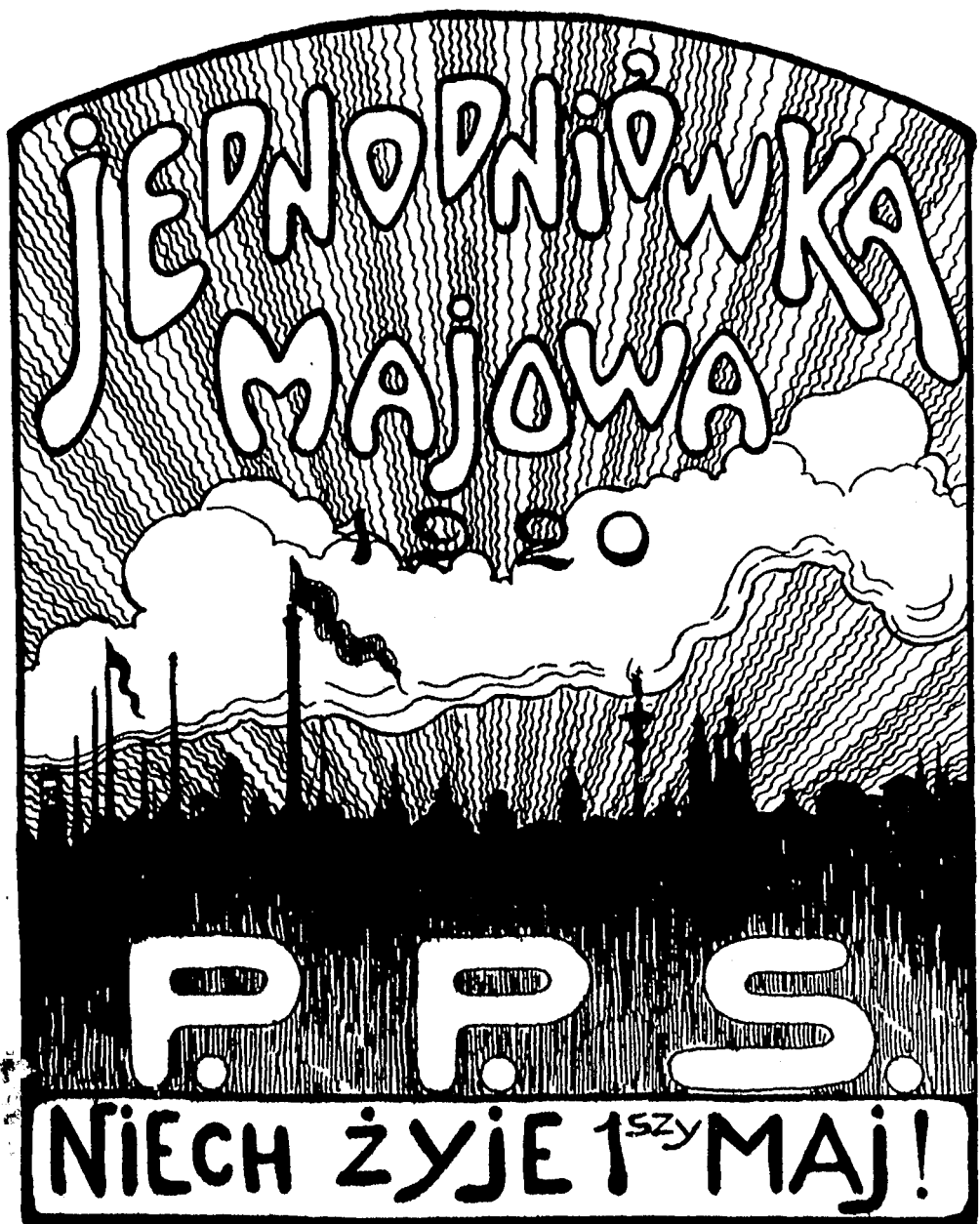
# MAISCHRIFT 1910



20 HELLER

Wien, 1910





Poland, 1920



# MARTELLO

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## PRIMO MAGGIO 1936

ABBASSO IL FASCISMO; VIVA LA RIVOLUZIONE SOCIALE.



New York, 1936



Osaka, 1926

Zum 1. Mai

Abends 8 Uhr

Wer gegen den Krieg ist,  
erscheint am 1. Mai  
Abends acht Uhr

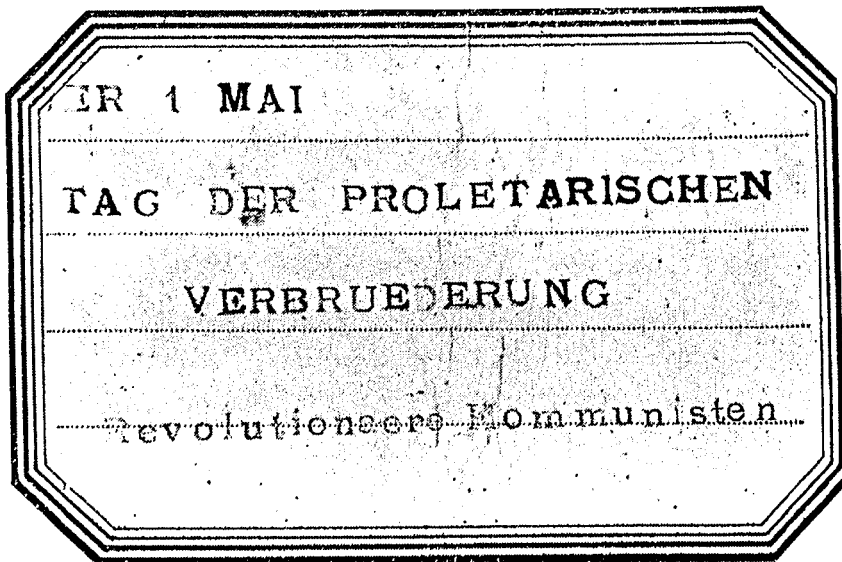
P o t s d a m e r P l a t z (Berlin )

Brot!

Freiheit!

Frieden!

*Rk. 15/14/16*



1er MAI 1943!

Ne sera pas une journée de duperie comme  
le voudraient les traîtres de Vichy.

Pas une entreprise sans son cahier de  
revendications et pour le faire aboutir,  
coude à coude, A L'ACTION JUSQU'A LA

G R E V E !

—:—:—:—:—:—

call for a demonstration on Sunday.

In the United States, hundreds of meetings were organized by the AF of L to support the demand of the Carpenters' Union for the eight-hour day from May 1, and several thousand carpenters went on strike in Chicago and New York as early as April. Whereas the AF of L sought to limit the movement to the carpenters without any reference to the international movement, the recently formed Socialist Party of the USA called for a May Day meeting in Union Square, New York, on the basis of the resolution of the Paris congress and declared that "*in the present state of industrial developement any economic movement not seeking to abolish wage slavery is condemned to impotence and defeat.*"

In a number of countries where no workers' organizations existed, the propaganda for May Day would lead to the establishment of the first labour parties and unions, starting in 1890 and following in later years.

When May Day 1890, the first International May Day in history, came around, it turned out to be a more forceful and impressive demonstration than its organizers had dared to hope, and the Labour International was revealed, to its enemies and to its followers, as a new political and social reality.

In Germany, the workers took no notice of the prohibitions: tens of thousands went on strike in eighteen cities and many more participated in mass-meetings and demonstrations all over the country. There were no incidents except at Hoechst, where the police charged the workers and wounded some. The employers made good their threat of firing striking workers, and new strikes broke out in protest against the dismissals. For the first two weeks of May, the port of Hamburg was shut down by a dock workers' strike.

In Austria-Hungary, strikes and demonstrations took place in all provinces: in Vienna, 40,000 to 150,000 workers, according to the different sources, participated in the main demonstration. In Britain, a group of unions opposed to postponing the demonstration to Sunday called a meeting in London on May 1 where 2,000

persons participated, but the meeting on May 4, in Hyde Park, turned out to be the most impressive of all the demonstrations held in the world, with over 300,000 participants. In Belgium, a general strike paralyzed the coal fields, with 100,000 miners out; the number of strikers in other industries was estimated at 50,000. There was no police mobilization at all, and therefore no incidents.

In Italy, there were numerous clashes between workers and the army which had virtually occupied the whole country. In Spain, strikes and demonstrations took place in forty cities. In Barcelona, a demonstration of 100,000 marched under red flags — according to one historian, *“in such a peaceful, disciplined and imposing fashion that General Blanco, governor of Catalonia, watching the procession from the terrace of his villa surrounded by his general staff, as if struck and dazzled, instinctively put his hand to the visor of his cap and saluted.”* Elsewhere in Barcelona, however, police repression caused several dead and the city was placed under a state of siege. In Madrid, a meeting of 20,000 was addressed by Pablo Iglesias, the founder of the Socialist Workers' Party. In Portugal, demonstrations took place in Lisbon and Porto, organized by the Socialist Party.

In Switzerland, where the government had not taken any special measures, peaceful meetings took place in all cities. Some workers, including those of the Oerlikon armament factory, went on strike. May Day was also celebrated in the Scandinavian countries, and in Stockholm a meeting of 100,000 was addressed by the founders of the Social-Democratic Party, August Palm and Hjalmar Branting.

Poland in 1890 was divided in three parts occupied by Germany, Austria-Hungary and Russia. Demonstrations took place in the Austrian part, but, more remarkably, also in Warsaw which was in the Russian part and therefore subjected to fierce repression. In Rumania, a meeting in Bucharest assembled 3,000 persons.

In the United States, the socialist meeting in New York's Union Square was attended by about 20,000 participants. In Chicago 35,000 demonstrators, including the striking carpenters, marched through the city. A meeting of 22,000 in Louisville,



Kentucky, was addressed by Samuel Gompers, president of the AF of L. The carpenters' strike lasted for two weeks to mid-May and was successful everywhere.

In Mexico, a mass-meeting had been organized by the workers' circle of Mexico City and in Cuba, then still a Spanish colony, all cigar factories went on strike (the cigarmakers' union had been declared illegal by the government) and a demonstration of 20,000 marched through Havana. The same year, the International Federation of Tobacco Workers, a forerunner organization of the IUF, was formally established in Europe.

May Day 1890 marks, in a practical sense, the birth of the modern labour movement. A conservative French Daily, *Le Siècle* (The Century), commented on May 7: *"It would be foolish to deny that a new and considerable event has taken place. On the same day and almost on the same hour, workers' associations in Europe have been able to concentrate the attention of all governments, to become a cause for concern and to force them to take serious and costly police measures... In the past, socialism was confined to a few large cities and was led almost always by ideologues representing little danger since their concepts were as vague as they were generous. Today, it is everywhere: it has thousands of citadels because industry has had to leave its centers to seek cheap labour in rural areas. Its army has increased four-fold; at the same time, it has increased its strength, if not as a political then surely as a strategic force, because through internationalism it has been able to exchange ideas, drop certain utopian concepts and discover the general law of economic science that, so far as labour is concerned, all nations are in solidarity."*

Frederick Engels, writing the second preface to the *Communist Manifesto* on May Day 1890, summed it up as follows: *"To-day, as I write these lines, the European and American proletariat is reviewing its fighting forces, mobilised for the first time, mobilised as one army, under one flag, for one immediate aim: the standard eight-hour working day to be established by legal enactment, as proclaimed by the Geneva Congress of the International in 1866, and again by the Paris Workers' Congress in 1889. And to-day's*

*spectacle will open the eyes of the capitalists and landlords of all countries to the fact that to-day the proletarians of all countries are united indeed.*

*If only Marx were still by my side to see this with his own eyes!"*

## May Day as a Weapon of Organization

May Day 1890 had passed. The international working class had demonstrated its unity and had gained a new consciousness of its strength and possibilities. But the eight-hour day had not been won except in a very few countries, let alone the decisions of the Paris congress. Therefore, without central direction or even mutual consultation, acting entirely on their own, all labour organizations in Europe decided to renew the demonstration the following year.

May Day 1891 was, on the whole, a repeat performance of the first: the French, Italian, Austrian and Spanish governments again mobilized their armies. In France, the army opened fire on demonstrators at Fourmies (near the Belgian border), experimenting a new rifle they had been issued days before. There were ten dead, including four women and two children aged 11 and 13. As in 1890, the governments of Belgium, Britain and Switzerland did nothing, and therefore did not create any incidents.

In the United States, the AF of L had called off all demonstrations. Even though the original AF of L decision had been that the carpenters' union was to make a beginning, and that unions in other trades would follow, Gompers would do nothing that could create closer links between the unions and the socialists, either in the US or internationally. After 1890, May Day was celebrated in the United States only by the socialists and other radical groups.

The Brussels congress of the Labour International, held in August 1891, noted that the two May Day demonstrations had

given a tremendous impulse to the labour movement world-wide. The Argentine delegates announced that their organization had been established on May Day 1890 in Buenos Aires. The Polish delegate declared that *"in Galicia, in Austrian Poland, May Day 1890 marks the beginning of the labour movement in any real sense"*. The French trade union delegate requested that May Day become a permanent day of demonstrations, *"which have done more for organizing new members in the last two years than our best efforts over the past ten years"*. The British delegate pointed out that a May Day meeting had been held that year in Dublin, which had been the largest labour meeting Ireland had ever known, and that in this way the brotherhood between British and Irish workers had been demonstrated. The Austrian delegate said that even government repression had helped strengthen the movement and insisted that May Day continue to be celebrated in the future.

After the Brussels congress, May Day became the official day of struggle, of remembrance and of celebration of the international labour movement. It grew in strength as demonstrations became more massive, and as new countries joined every year: in Russian Poland the army killed 30 demonstrators in Lodz in 1892, but by the end of the century May Day had spread throughout the Tsarist Empire. In Greece, May Day was first celebrated in 1893, and the Greek Social-Democratic Party was established on May Day 1911.

In Bulgaria, May Day was first celebrated in 1898, in Turkey in 1920.

In Latin America, we have seen that in Mexico and Cuba May Day was celebrated from the first year. In Brazil, the first May Day celebration appears to have taken place in 1892, but the Socialist Party of Brazil was founded only on May 1, 1912. The first May Day celebration in Chile was in 1907.

May Day celebrations were maintained in the different European countries throughout World War I, despite the collapse of the Labour International. On May Day 1916, Karl Liebknecht addressed a meeting in Berlin and denounced the war. Arrested and sentenced to two and a half year in prison, he was freed by

the November revolution of 1918, only to be assassinated in January 1919 together with Rosa Luxemburg.

In Asia, May Day was celebrated for the first time in Indonesia in 1918, in China in 1920, and in Japan in 1922. In Indochina, India and the Philippines it was celebrated as from 1930, in Iran in 1947.

In Africa, May Day was first celebrated in South Africa in 1904 and every year, from 1919, but only by small socialist groups of white workers. As from the 1920s, unions that organized both white and black workers started to regularly celebrate May Day. In French colonial Africa, May Day celebrations became general from 1945.

## Charlatans and Impostors

The enemies of the labour movement have attempted to deal with May Day by repression, by falsification or by annexation.

In South Africa, the right to celebrate May Day was abolished in 1963; in South Korea it is illegal and March 15 has been declared official Labour Day.

Fascist dictators have either prohibited May Day altogether (as in Portugal from 1926 to 1974) or turned it into a day of glorification of the dictatorship (as in fascist Italy, Franco's Spain, Pétain's France or in Nazi Germany, with monster parades by the "labour front" of the regime, organized in military fashion and with compulsory attendance).

In 1955, Pope Pius XII officialized a celebration of May Day as the day of "St. Joseph the Artisan" in order, he explained, to incite *"modern society to achieve what it is still lacking in social peace."* But, since the 1960s and 1970s, Catholic unions celebrate May Day as international labour day, in many cases with the socialist unions.

In Russia, May Day became the official national holiday after

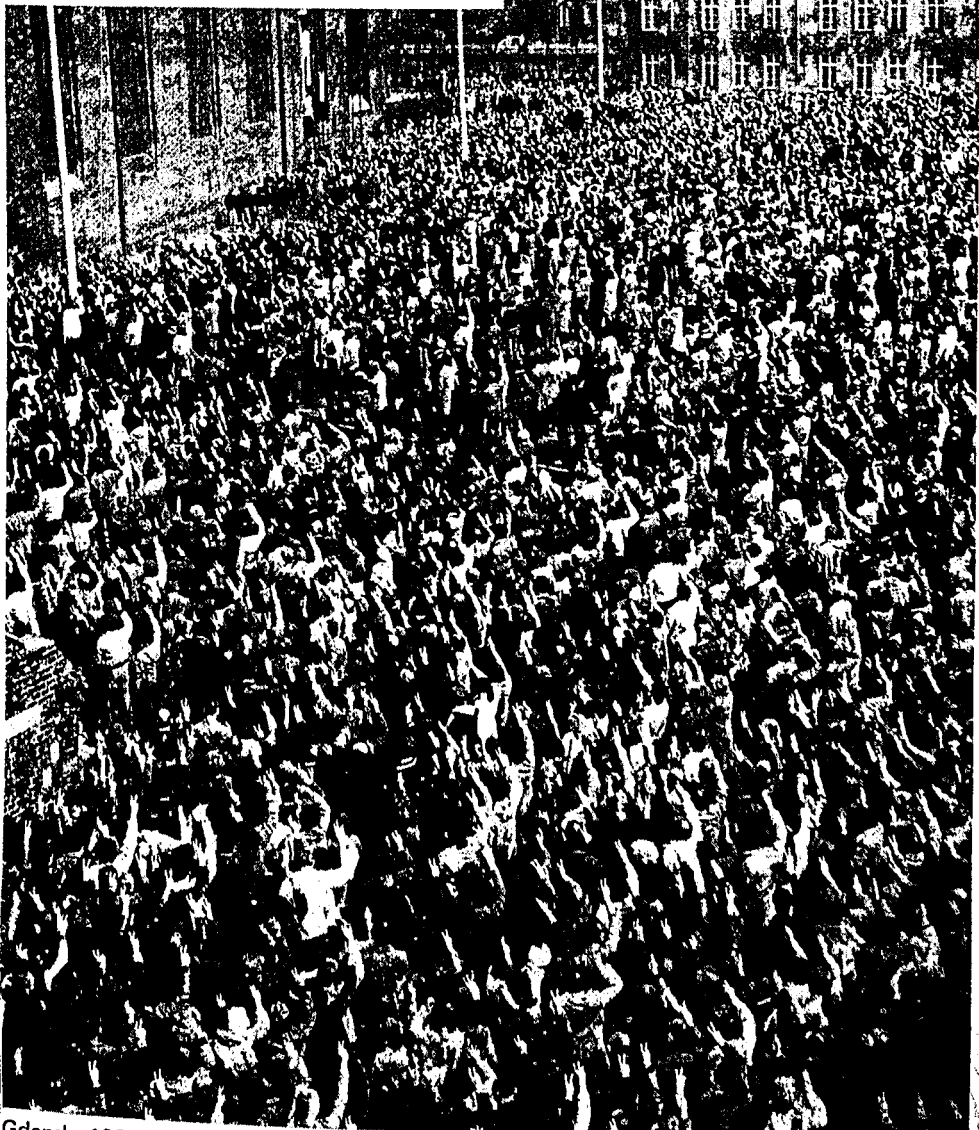


Madrid, 1977



Montevideo, 1983

# SOLIDARNOŚĆ



Gdansk, 1983





South Africa, 1985



the October revolution of 1917. As from 1920, however, workers were called upon to work on May Day to “win the battle of production.” In 1934, an ecstatic French delegate reported to the French communist daily that a seven hours’ parade (including the army, which “in Russia is one with the people”) had marched past the Lenin mausoleum where “comrades Tomski, Bukharin, Stalin, Molotov and others” reviewed the marchers to the sounds of the *Internationale*. Four years later, Bukharin was the principal accused in the second Moscow Trial and was murdered in jail after being condemned on framed-up charges. Tomski, the secretary of the Federation of Trade Unions, had committed suicide, realizing the hopelessness of defending trade union autonomy and the inevitability of suffering the same fate. Stalin alone had won, and had established absolute power. The *Internationale* ceased to be the national anthem of the USSR in 1944.

Today, May Day in communist countries is celebrated by military parades, displaying the latest weaponry, for the purpose of demonstrating the might of a dictatorship, not of the proletariat, but above it and against it.

In the years following the Second World War, the combined effect of the Cold War and of the economic boom of the 1950s and 1960s led to a depolitization of the labour movement in Europe.

Under the guise of anti-communism, conservatives promoted a campaign of intimidation against anything “Red”, directed in fact against the labour movement as a whole. Formerly radical intellectuals proclaimed *the end of ideology* and social scientists solemnly shared their discovery that the class struggle was over — what a relief! — and that the workers had all turned middle class. At the same time the economic boom, which some thought would last forever, diluted the sense of identity of the labour movement and blunted its fighting spirit. Under these circumstances, May Day in many countries became a “holiday” on which workers were expected to complacently enjoy their gains by going on picnics and celebrating, not solidarity with their fellow workers throughout the world, but the return of Spring and, in the Northern Hemi-

sphere, of the warm weather. Many unions fell into this trap, and the price paid, in terms of demobilization, loss of membership, intellectual disarmament and loss of moral fiber, turned out to be a high one when the bills came due in the 1960s and 1970s.

## May Day Lives

In the last decade, some of the most memorable pages of labour history were written on May Day, many times in a struggle against a dictatorship.

In Portugal, a forty-year old fascist regime was toppled on April 25, 1974, through a democratic uprising of the army. On May Day, six days later, the people was in the streets. One million people, nearly the entire population of the city, demonstrated in Lisbon and celebrated their newly-won freedom.

In Spain, the first open May Day demonstrations after the civil war took place in 1977, during the transition from the Franco dictatorship to the democratic government. Several thousand workers responded to the call of the three major trade union centers of the time, the UGT, Comisiones Obreras and USO. The anarchist CNT also organized a separate meeting. The police attacked the demonstrators with tear gas and rubber bullets: there were two hundred wounded and several hundred arrests in Madrid alone. Demonstrations also took place in Barcelona, Valencia and La Coruña, among other cities.

The same year, the largest May Day demonstration ever called in Turkey, by the trade union federation DISK, ended tragically when terrorists opened fire on a crowd of 150,000 which had assembled at Taksim Square in Istanbul. There were 38 dead and over two hundred wounded. The attack in Taksim Square was a step in the escalation of terror which led up to the imposition of the military dictatorship in 1980 and the prohibition of DISK. The leaders of DISK, after some five years in prison, are still on trial. In a separate trial of the Hotel and Restaurant Workers'

Union OLEYIS, the prosecution charged the union with having actively participated in the preparations and demonstrations for May Day from 1976 to 1980.

In Poland, May Day 1983 was a show of strength by the independent workers' union Solidarność, which had been declared illegal in December, 1981. Some 40,000 demonstrators gathered in Gdansk alone, and were dispersed by police using tear gas, water cannons and baton charges. Ten thousand rallied in Warsaw and thousands of other Solidarność supporters faced police attacks in Krakow, Szczecin, Poznan, Gdynia and other cities, twenty in all. One worker, Ryszard Smagur, was killed by the police in the steel town of Nowa Huta. In Gdansk, Bogdan Lis, a Solidarność leader, declared: *"May Day is ours... Today in Poland May Day is a genuine workers' celebration. Let no one take it away from us!"*

In South Africa, workers started taking back May Day, regardless of government prohibitions, in the last two or three years. May Day 1985 was the biggest celebration in the history of the country, with over 20,000 workers demanding that May 1 be declared a paid public holiday. Meetings were held in Cape Town, Port Elizabeth, East London, Durban, Pietermaritzburg, Ladysmith, Estcourt, Secunda, Mamelodi, Johannesburg and the East Rand. In Cape Town, John Ernstzen, of the municipal workers' union, declared: *"1985 is an important year because thousands of workers have decided to finish with waiting."*

In the Philippines, when the militant trade unions regrouped under the Marcos dictatorship and organized a new national center, they called it *Kilusang Mayo Uno*, May First Movement.

May Day is an important and universal legacy left by the Labour International to the workers of the world. It has been celebrated under the gun of military occupation, in jails, in labour camps, by small groups meeting secretly in fear of arrest, as well as in mass demonstrations and mass meetings where workers have had or took the right to do so. It has been celebrated in every corner of the earth. For the last hundred years, despite repression, falsification or forgetfulness, it is the day on which the working class rises to its feet and proudly proclaims: *"I was, I am, I always will be."*

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# The Origins of American Labour Day

*The following article, by Richard P. Hunt, appeared in the New York Times of September 6, 1982, under the title "Socialists (Gasp!) Spawned Labor Day".*

Now that Labor Day is 100 years old, the time has come to admit that this national holiday was spawned and hatched by socialists — a fact that Labor Day orators seldom see fit to mention.

In the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners, it is gospel that the idea of a holiday to celebrate the working man and woman originated with Peter J. McGuire, a founder of the union and later its general secretary. In the International Association of Machinists, it is scripture that the founder of Labor Day was Matthew Maguire, a minor official of that union. Never mind. When some 4,000 working men marched up Broadway, and then Fifth Avenue, in the first Labor Day parade, on Tuesday, September 5, 1882, both Peter McGuire and Matthew Maguire were socialists.

Peter McGuire was one of the founders of the Social Democratic Party of North America, in 1874; in 1881, he represented the party at an international convention of socialists in Europe. He was not a Marxist, but a disciple of Ferdinand Lassalle, a German radical. Mr. McGuire later abandoned socialism, but he was certainly a socialist on May 8, 1882, when, by his account, he proposed that a national holiday for the working classes be established and called Labor Day. Unfortunately, Mr. McGuire did not say where he said that, who else was there or what was done about it. No record of any such meeting was produced, and no witness testified that he heard Mr. McGuire say it. However, William Green, as president of the American Federation of Labor, accepted Mr. McGuire's version in 1929 and it became doctrine for most of the labor movement.

Matthew Maguire was the first member of the Socialist Labor Party elected to public office — as an alderman in Paterson, N.J., in 1894. It is not clear just where he stood in the spectrum of socialist thought in those days but obviously he was acceptable to the Marxists in the party when he ran as its candidate for Vice President of the United States in 1896.

The minutes of a meeting of the Central Labor Union held at Science Hall, 141 East 8th Street, on Sunday, May 14, 1882, show that an unidentified delegate proposed "*holding a monster labor festival*" the following September. William G. McGabe, who was a delegate from Local No.6 of the International Typographical Union, wrote 15 years later that he was there and the unidentified delegate was Matthew Maguire. In 1968, this prompted Secretary of Labor Willard Wirtz to declare that "officially", as far as the Labor Department was concerned, Matthew Maguire was the father of Labor Day.

Paternity aside, Matthew Maguire did most of the work. As secretary of the organizing committee, he chose the date, mapped out the parade route, solicited the unions to march, told them where to assemble and invited the dignitaries to the reviewing stand.

Samuel Gompers, the founder and first president of the American Federation of Labor, would have nothing to do with the Central Labor Union, which he regarded as an instrument of the rival Knights of Labor, and did not attend. Peter McGuire, who later became secretary of the A.F.L., was there and made the first recorded suggestion that "*we shall have a festival of this kind once a year.*" He did not call it Labor Day.

Both Peter McGuire and Matthew Maguire were also members of the Advance Labor Club of Brooklyn, which was a cover name for Local No. 1562 of the then partly clandestine Knights of Labor. Terence V. Powderly, the Grand Master Workman of the Knights, claimed with benefit of hindsight that the order had been discussing the idea of a labor holiday, and it is conceivable that both Mr. McGuire and Mr. Maguire were agents for the Knights. But to Mr. Gompers and Mr. Green, suggesting that the Knights of Labor originated Labor Day would have been even more heretical than pointing out that the idea came from a socialist.



International Union of Food and Allied Workers' Associations  
Rampes du Pont-Rouge 8, CH-1213 Petit-Lancy, Switzerland