

Bring back May Day!

Geov Parrish - WorkingForChange.com

04.29.05 - For many Americans, "May Day" brings to mind images of phalanxes of Soviet soldiers, goose-stepping through Red Square behind massive tanks, while millions of onlookers obediently cheer. (It's a process not too different from the obedient cheering that goes on here every July 4 -- but never mind.) For other people, "May Day" is a pagan holiday, Beltane, more known (and often loved) for maypoles or other fertility rituals than for political struggles.

May Day, the political version, is an American holiday -- one celebrated for the last century everywhere in the world except America, and one whose origins are well worth remembering. Because May Day began as a strike for a basic right we're now in the process of losing.

On that day -- May 1, 1886 -- "International Workers' Day" began as a series of general strikes in Chicago and other Midwestern cities for the eight-hour day. Some 340,000 workers participated; it was a campaign that had already been going on strong for quite some time. But the strike took on particular significance when, two days later, police attacked striking workers at McCormick Reaper, on Chicago's south side. Four workers were killed and over 200 injured. And at a demonstration on the following day, May 4, to protest the police riot, a bomb went off at Haymarket Square -- the infamous "Haymarket Massacre" that led to death sentences for eight anarchists convicted, with no evidence at all, for conspiracy to commit murder.

Three of the anarchists were pardoned before their deaths, the other five posthumously. But the public and police hostility to organized labor that was whipped up over Haymarket meant that, in turn, May Day became an international labor rallying cry for the right of workers to organize in general, and for the eight-hour day in particular. By the end of the decade, May Day was a holiday celebrated by workers and workers' movements in every industrialized country in the world.

It still is -- now, in fact, it's observed globally. Except, ironically, in the land of the holiday's birth. The holiday's burgeoning popularity led Congress, in 1894, to establish "Labor Day" in September to honor American workers -- a holiday established, not by ordinary workers themselves as an expression of empowerment, but by big business and their Congressional apologists, as a way to try to dictate what workers

were and weren't allowed to celebrate. One day belonged to the workers; the other 364 days belonged to big business, and we were to work as many hours of those days as business pleased.

The strategy failed, of course. Eventually. It took another entire generation of struggle, but by 1912, federal workers were granted the eight-hour day; and in 1917, while America was desperate for the cooperation of unions in the war effort, the Eight Hour Act became law. And there, one would think, the matter was settled.

Okay, quick: Do you actually work only eight hours in a day? Only 40 hours in a week? Five days?

Not very many of us, any longer. We stay longer in the office, we take work home with us, we take work everywhere with us, because at some level we fear that if we don't, either the company will fail or it will replace us with people who'll make those sacrifices. Nor, in the land that gave birth to May Day, do workers here get anywhere close to the vacation or sick day benefits we get in other industrialized countries. And let's not even talk about health care coverage, which isn't even linked to one's workplace in most of the industrialized world -- it's accepted as a universal need and right. Here, our system has already rendered health care too expensive to obtain without insurance. Now, it's denying more and more of the workforce health insurance that covers meaningful parts of the cost of actually getting sick, or, for nearly 50 million of us, any health insurance at all. And for all of these effective losses in compensation for our work, we're still working harder and longer hours than our grandfathers.

The estimable folk singer Charlie King has a song called "Bring Back the Eight-Hour Day." He wrote it over a decade ago, and since then, things have gotten worse, not better. More and more, we're asked to sacrifice most of our waking hours to help people make money -- usually, other people, while the money we make doesn't even remotely keep up with what they're getting, even as a percentage, and any trade-off we're making for future job security is a comforting myth we tell ourselves.

Ultimately, though, the eight-hour day was never about money. It was about having time for the rest of our lives. I can't begin to count the number of people I've talked with over the years who, when laid up or laid off or otherwise taken out of their daily grind, blurt out some statement along the lines of "I can't believe how much my job interferes with my life!" That's both because a lot of us don't like our work, and, even more importantly, but increasingly, that's all we have time for. No time for family, for friends, for relationships, for travel, for study, for hobbies, for our community, for the stuff that makes life fun. And worthwhile.

We need, in short, a campaign for the eight-hour day. **Let's bring back May Day.**

(c) Working Assets Online. All rights reserved.

URL: <http://www.workingforchange.com/article.cfm?ItemID=18971>

May Day- Sunday, May 1, 2005

(Haymarket Memorial, Des Plaines Avenue & Randolph St., Chicago, Ill.)

Reclaiming The Original Labor Day In Chicago!



(Picture by Steve Tisza, President CWA Local 4250, Chicago)

Les Orear, 94 year-old President of the Illinois labor History Society, welcomes several hundred Chicago union activists attending a rally held on Sunday, May 1, 2005 at Chicago's Haymarket Square, the sight of the 1886 Chicago Haymarket Affair!

The event was organized by the Illinois Labor History Society, the Chicago Federation of labor, the Illinois AFL-CIO, Jobs With Justice, the National Organization of Legal Services Workers (UAW Local 2320) and the Chicago Religious Leadership Network on Latin America.

In Unity-Strength & Solidarity:

**Steve Tisza, President
CWA Local 4250
Chicago**

Attention Working Families!

=====
G R E A T
=====

MAY DAY CELEBRATION

Reclaiming The Original Labor Day in Chicago!

Sunday, May 1st at 2:00 PM

=====
A T T H E
=====

SITE OF THE NEW HAYMARKET MEMORIAL

Des Plaines Ave. between Randolph and Lake Street

Workers all over the world recognize May 1st (May Day) as Labor Day because of the tragic events that occurred right here in Chicago at Haymarket Square in 1886 that have come to symbolize our nation's struggle to uphold workers' rights to organize and to exercise their constitutional right to free speech and assembly.

Now 119 years later, the entire Chicago labor community is gathering for the first time on May Day to honor its past, pay tribute to its fallen heroes, and continue to promote and fight for many of the same workplace issues that the Haymarket Martyrs defended with their own lives.

A distinguished list of speakers will be on hand to denounce the constant attacks on workers including President Bush's current plans to privatize our nation's Social Security system. They will also expose the anti-union tactics of corporations such as Wal-Mart; criticize global trade agreements that fail to address basic human rights; and condemn nations, including Colombia, whose workers are still being killed for their attempts to join a union. A delegation of Colombian trade unionists will be on hand to install the first international plaque on the new Haymarket Memorial.

This event is called by the Illinois Labor History Society, the Chicago Federation of Labor, AFL-CIO, the Illinois AFL-CIO, Jobs with Justice, the National Organization of Legal Services Workers (UAW Local 2320) and the Chicago Religious Leadership Network on Latin America.

All Workers Welcome - All Workers Unite!