

May Day

Albert Libertad

1st May 1905

The national and international holiday of the organized proletariat.

The Bastille Day of the unionized working class, the replay of the holiday of the Bistros.

The tragi-comic anniversary of something that will be taken away ...

May Day 1905: Prologue

In the archiepiscopal church the grand ceremony takes place: the high priests, who have been delegated to other places, are absent.

The tribune is filled. The office is invaded. The strangest looking faces appear there. An assessor, delegate and secretary of I-don't-know-what, who has decorated his breast with a large tie, with his decoration and his lit up mug, set the appropriate tone.

Appearing in a curious parade, all alone come the eternal bit players and the future stars. In the wings we can imagine the presence of influential directors falsifying the system.

Alcohol overflows in smelly burps from almost every mouth.

A few ordinary workers, a hundred at most, have come in a spirit of combativeness, or though obligation. There are a few who are sincere, thinking they are working for their emancipation, and who are sickened and disillusioned by the drunken events around them.

A bizarre salad where the words "Organized proletariat," "workers demands," "Eight hour day," dance about. "All arise in 1906," "The Bosses," "The Exploiters," "The Exploited," "My Corporation," "Delegates," "The Union of...,"etc. are seasoned before us.

One has the impression of listening to a constantly wound up phonograph , but whose worn out notches allow only a few words to escape.

Any attempt at serious debate is impossible. We are in the hall not to learn but – it appears – to impress the bosses.

We must all be in agreement, *all friends, all brothers*, so that the press can't say there was any disagreement.

We are working for the gallery.

Should the press say tomorrow how many drunks there were at the tribune? Should it speak of the exceptional receipts at the bistros within a kilometer of the Labor Exchange? Should it count the number of men who came home at night with their bellies full of alcohol and their pockets empty?

Across from the Labor Exchange a group decorated in red is drinking... I pass by...a man detaches himself and gives me two *sous* "for good luck," taking me for a poor devil and so as to get a laugh. Pieces of silver fall to the ground, rolling from his pockets.

Working class emancipation through union organization!

But let's go back...Nevertheless, a few notes are interesting and throw a bit of light on this milieu. Two navvies speak with a simplicity, a great sobriety and please quite a few; a man who keeps his hat on and at whom the union crowd shouts: "Your hat!" says some true things; Gabrielle Petit, with her raw eloquence, maintaining her impulsive character, breaks up the disgusting monotony of the dogmatic ritual.

After an incident where we – the best as well as the worst – take on grotesque forms in the rapidity of our gestures, where can be felt the irritation of disgust and fatigue of some, of alcohol among others, afterwards, we must sing.

Sing the ditty that fits the circumstance.

It's a family from Bercy, former owner of a special cabaret for snobs and the neurotic near Clichy that has made up the words and the music.

It's not so much the ignorant crowd that wants the song, it's the leaders: the director Pouget forgets himself so much as to leave the wings. One has to sing to the people. And the woman, with a certain courage, incidentally, not caring about our more or less correct shouting, waits for the right moment to emit her note. One must live, after all.

We do all we can so as not to sing, fully understanding how ridiculous this graceless song is between these four walls, giving this struggle a soppy character...But in France everything ends in a song. And we stop, vanquished not by the force of these men, whose cunning masters, slipping slander in, order them to respect us, but rather by their thoughtlessness, their blindness, by the atmosphere of alcohol that we can no longer breathe.

And here is the final scene.

Lepine has given his police clique the order to hold itself back... To let this religious crowd enjoy its icon, its idol, its flag The doorways are clear; the policemen are behind the metro worksites, waiting for the opportune moment.

The Labor Exchange, squeezed in between two houses, in this narrow corridor, is ugly. Its base is covered in posters, its upper floors are slashed by a red band with gold lettering for 1906. A red flag with a black crepe (colors authorized by the law) recalls the tragedy of Limoges. Nothing is missing; neither the hosanna, nor the remembrance of the martyrs.

They're going to raise the red flag at the window! The ditty was good, but the sight of the icon...that's sublime! I look and I see once again... the scenes where to the cry of "God wills it," brandishing the cross, the Peter the Hermits led the crowd to their death. Only here the preachers chew their tobacco and let the crowd leave on their own...In any event, the crowd's enthusiasm is only on the surface.

A large mass heads toward the red flag, and a "Ca Ira," broken up with hiccups, can be heard... It's pure delirium.

The cops!

The anger calms. The honest worker reappears... and flees, followed by the policemen's boots.

The comedy is over... They have to disperse and the crowd flees, hiccupping and stumbling, while exasperated comrades, wanting to resist orders and shoves, shout "anarchy" in the face of the police workers as a challenge.

And in the distance...the cabarets, the bars, the thousand tentacles of that terrible octopus,
alcohol, suck out and breathes in all this worker blood.
It's the holiday of the organized proletariat.
It's May Day.

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