

Beyond May Day Parades

Building a Counter-Movement in Malaysia and Worldwide

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Contents

ANARCHISM, CHICAGO AND MAY DAY	4
MAY DAY: GLOBAL STRIKE OR RITUAL PARADE?	4
TAKING UNIONISM FORWARD	4
WHERE TO NEXT?	5
MAY DAY, ANARCHISM AND UNIONISM IN MALAYSIA	5
MAY DAY TODAY: GLOBALISE FROM BELOW	6
NEO-LIBERALISM AT THE CROSSROADS – WHAT NEXT?	6
CONCLUSION: WORKING CLASS POWER FOR A BETTER WORLD	7
REFERENCES	7

Let us learn from our past struggles, in the USA and in Malaysia. May Day should be an occasion to reflect not jubilate, to engage not agonize, to demand not relent, and to organise, not complain. We need systemic change that can guarantee equality, fraternity, self-management and socialisation of the commonwealth, guided by a bottom-up approach to decision making. We need a labour movement that is multicultural and international, feminist, active in urban and rural struggles, and that prizes reason over superstition, justice over hierarchy, self-management over state power, international solidarity over nationalism. We need to fight for a universal human community, not parochialism and separatism. The organisational power and strategic location of the Malaysian union movement provides an excellent point of departure for building this counter-movement. This is our appeal and message as we celebrate this May Day, on the eve of dark days in which the storm clouds gather over humanity – but in which the light of hope of a better future can break through, if we arm ourselves with the correct ideas and approaches. May Day began as an example of globalisation-from-below. Let us rally to it. Let us take back its original vision: liberty, equality, unity.

May Day, popularly known as international workers day, started with a historic fight for decent working hours that culminated in the execution of four trade unionists in Chicago, United States, in November 1887. This was a decisive moment in the struggle for a just society through militant trade unionism. May Day was globalised from 1889 by the workers' movement, being held in China from 1919, and in Malaysia from 1921. Today it remains a key day of reference – but its roots and aims are often forgotten.

May Day commemorations can be a platform to harness the power of the working class and poor into a counter-movement for social protection and changed society. Ordinary people worldwide face ecological problems, economic crisis, massive unemployment, low wages, denials of right to freedom of association, vulnerable, informal work and sub-contracting, suffering as immigrants – all in the context of destructive market competition and the rule of self-serving politicians and bosses.

Solutions do not lie in reformed capitalism or in the free market: the problems humanity faces have gotten worse. Capitalism adversely affects working class communities and their livelihoods; states act to enforce these horrors with laws and guns.

In Malaysia, this destruction is manifested in an ecological crisis expressed in disasters such as flooding that displaces tens of thousands, police brutality against picketing workers (like the National Union of Tobacco Industry), and a massive gap between rich and poor, powerful and powerless. Unions need to be central to the fight to win social protection floors, decent conditions and a better future for the Malaysian working family.

This article draws attention to the alternative: the “anarchist” ethos of firstly, building a working and poor people’s counter-culture to unravel the dominant class culture in society; and secondly, building a counter-power from below, that draws its energy from the trade unions and workers, the unemployed, the poor and the peasantry (small farmers), to fight to change the world for the better.

Let us start by looking at what the “Chicago Martyrs” died for – and then at the historical role and the future potential of Malaysian trade unions in the fight for justice and equality.

ANARCHISM, CHICAGO AND MAY DAY

What the “Chicago Martyrs” died for in 1887 is often forgotten. These comrades were, in truth, proudly part of the global anarchist movement.

The term “anarchism” is often misunderstood. We still see this today, when the anarchist movement is growing everywhere. Anarchists and syndicalists like the “Chicago Martyrs” simply stand for a society run from the bottom-up by ordinary workers and farmers and their families – and not by capitalists and not by politicians. In place of the working and poor masses being ruled and exploited from above, they argue communities and workplaces should be run through federated people’s councils and assemblies, based on participatory democracy, self-management, participatory planning.

This new society would emerge from the creation of a transformative counter-culture and counter-power among the working and poor masses, which would enable them to fight for improvements in the here and now – but eventually provide the framework for a whole new society. The new society would emerge in the womb of the old, through struggle. In this way, tomorrow is built in today’s movements.

Anarchism developed as a global mass movement from the 1870s onwards, including in the United States, and in parts of Africa and Asia; its stress on struggle from below for a radically democratic socialist society and for individual freedom appealed to the oppressed in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Europe and the Americas.

MAY DAY: GLOBAL STRIKE OR RITUAL PARADE?

This was the movement of the “Chicago martyrs”. Workers around the world were shocked by their brutal executions: they wanted to show their solidarity, worldwide, to fight worldwide, together. May Day was adopted as an international working class day of struggle, firstly, for remembrance of the “Chicago Martyrs” and secondly, to continue to wage the fight for justice and freedom.

While some political currents saw this as meaning basically street processions and speeches, the anarchists aimed to use May Day as a mighty tool for organising the working class into a global general strike. When anarchists and other socialists formed the Labour and Socialist International in 1889, they jointly agreed to proclaim May Day as international workers day, to commemorate the Haymarket martyrs, to fight for the 8 hour day, and to build the global unity of the working class, the peasantry and the poor.

TAKING UNIONISM FORWARD

So, we need to move beyond the usual May Day pattern of declaring work-free days, and, as workers, engage proactively in grappling with the challenges facing the working classes in Malaysia and elsewhere. These challenges include the rights of migrant workers, the right to organise and bargain collectively, and the fights against occupational hazards and for decent working hours.

We must admit that much needs to be done to make the union movement relevant to the larger, struggling, oppressed sector of society, to push for real improvements in the conditions of the working and poor masses.

But unions have responsibilities that go far beyond simple bread-and-butter issues like wages. They provide a space to mobilise and educate people in large numbers, to overcome divisions of race, language, sex and migrant/ local. They also have an unmatched strategic power at the point of production that makes them a very powerful force and ally for other segments of the masses. They can provide powerful muscles for all progressive struggles.

Labour creates wealth. This means the masses have great structural power, and that unions are especially well-placed to wield this power.

WHERE TO NEXT?

But the burning questions remains: how can this strategic power be used to empower all the masses who toil to make the wealth? And, when that power is wielded, what steps can be taken to ensure that those who toil will have control over this wealth?

At present, it is not the masses, who toil to create wealth, that benefit. It is the elite economic and political minorities who enjoying the lion's share – without doing the lion's work.

The answer to these questions, which can be learnt from the “Chicago Martyrs”, is in building a working and poor people's counter-culture and counter power, with the anarchist ethos. This building can start from the strong foundations laid by many years of union struggle.

The “Chicago Martyrs” were part of a powerful movement, which produced its own popular newspapers, ran theatres, held rallies, organised the unemployed, fought against women's oppression, racism and the hatred of foreigners, and that educated and mobilised the masses on a positive programme for an anarchist world. They actively built the ideas and structures needed for that world to emerge: they built counter-culture and counter-power. It was this mass movement for which they gave their lives. We need to build similar capacities.

MAY DAY, ANARCHISM AND UNIONISM IN MALAYSIA

Why should Malaysian labour not learn from this, and thereby use May Day as a moment to reflect on – and champion – a radical unionism that will place unions at the heart of the people's struggle for justice and freedom, anchored in the current challenges facing migrant workers' right to social protection and decent working hours in Malaysia?

Unionism in Malaysia has a proud history of fighting for justice and freedom. In 1919, May Day was celebrated in Beijing and Shanghai, and in 1921, it was celebrated for the first time – clandestinely – in Ipo, Malaysia. The country was then a British colony, and the workers fought colonialism too. And it was the anarchists who started May Day and the union movement in Malaysia. They were part of a radical network stretching across China, to Indonesia, to Japan, as well as into the West: anarchists, mainly Chinese, started May Day in Singapore.

In 1922, printers, fearful of colonial repression, refused to print the anarchist materials for May Day. But many anarchist materials entered the country from outside, like “Anarchist Morality” by Piotr Kropotkin, local materials, like Tai Yeung (“Sun”) of Kuala Lumpur and Yan Kheun (“Power of the Proletariat”) of Gopeng, near Ipoh. Attacks by a few anarchists on high-ranking colonial

officials in Kuala Lumpur led to repression and meanwhile, the anarchists faced growing rivals from the rising Communist movement. And leftists in the unions were heavily repressed by the British in the 1920s and 1930s.

After World War 2, the colonial government changed its stance on unions, allowing some rights, but was determined to push leftists like anarchists out and to divide Indians and Chinese. The Malaysian Trade Union Council (MTUC) is a federation of trade unions registered in 1955. The oldest national centre representing the Malaysian workers, its affiliated unions represent all major industries and sectors, with approximately 500,000 members.

The organizational strength of MTUC should be harnessed to agitate for the just and humane working conditions that May Day demands. This should include work amongst the migrant workers, about whose debilitating working conditions horrifying stories are known. To unions like MTUC falls the duty of uniting all workers, against oppressive economic and political elites.

MAY DAY TODAY: GLOBALISE FROM BELOW

The working class in Malayasia is part of the global proletariat and shares its pain and power. Working class challenges become ever more global the more capital and states globalize. Hence, labour internationalism and transnational solidarities become inevitable for meeting the challenges of building a counter-hegemonic bloc that taps its energy both from the shop floor, in the working class districts, and among the peasantry, poor and unemployed.

The MTUC together with civil society groups in Malaysia need to form a formidable organisation (a counter-power) for addressing the social holocaust. As capital and states globalise, popular organisations must globalise, with a programme for democratic unions, unity among the people, social justice and struggle against the bosses and politicians. The alternative is grim, deeper inequality, and deep national and racial divisions in the class of the dispossessed.

Economic growth should only be celebrated if embedded in rights protection, a shifting balance of power to ordinary people, environmental sustainability, improved conditions, and the creation from below of a new and better order.

NEO-LIBERALISM AT THE CROSSROADS — WHAT NEXT?

Despite the global crisis of neo-liberal capitalism, what alternatives are being proposed? This is the question that must be faced.

Neo-liberalism is not a solution for the working and poor masses. It has forced labour into retreat through flexible labour markets characterised by outsourcing, subcontracting, labour brokerage and mass firings. It has weakened the organisational power of the working class, and promoted the proliferation of unorganised, vulnerable employment and an expanding informal sector. Meanwhile the commodification of welfare, the removal of subsidies, and rising taxes and prices, have hit the masses hard.

In the face of the challenges, the MTUC and the Malaysian labour movement need to revise its organising and political strategy. It is important to build a counter-movement that can replace the existing rentier and predatory state system with a participatory democracy from the bottom-up, based on the principles of equality and social justice as envisioned by the anarchists and the “Chicago Martyrs.”

CONCLUSION: WORKING CLASS POWER FOR A BETTER WORLD

The organisational power and strategic location of the Malaysian union movement provides an excellent point of departure for building a counter-movement. The strength of the Malaysian working class, both in white and blue collar jobs, can and should be translated into a viable political and social movement that has a clear agenda for change – and provide an alternative to the current, ruinous state system. A movement that should exemplify a counter-culture, counter-power and practice that is bottom-up, democratic, based on solidarity, participation and accountability, that refuses to rely on politicians and leaders and that fights for a world that goes beyond both capitalism and neo-liberalism and statism and parliaments.

To struggle to fix the current state system would be an exercise in futility: even the best politicians are powerless to change the state. We dare not tinker with reform that always fails. Rather, we need systemic change that can guarantee equality, fraternity, self-management and socialisation of the commonwealth, guided by a bottom-up approach to decision making. We need a labour movement that is multicultural and international, feminist, active in urban and rural struggles, and that prizes reason over superstition, justice over hierarchy, self-management over state power, international solidarity over nationalism. We need to fight for a universal human community, not parochialism and separatism.

This is our appeal and message as we celebrate this May Day, on the eve of dark days in which the storm clouds gather over humanity – but in which the light of hope of a better future can break through, if we arm ourselves with the correct ideas and approaches.

May Day began as an example of globalisation-from-below. And it continues to be a rallying point for workers everywhere, 120 years on. Let us rally to it. Let us take back its original vision: liberty, equality, unity.

Hence, May Day should be an occasion to reflect not jubilate, to engage not agonize, to demand not relent, and to organise, not complain.

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