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Why May Day?

An African Working Class Perspective

Leroy Maisiri

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Like a baby deer born into an unforgiving world with three broken legs, life has never been fair for the working class. We have witnessed centuries pass by, half-awake, half-trapped, half-fed.

Locked in a cage fight with feet shackled to the ground (pound for pound, “no kicking allowed” they said) while the state and capitalism take turns at us, the dazed giant called the working class. With complicated combinations, the system lands organised blows: a punch to the heart called colonialism and apartheid; a quick right uppercut called minimal wages; a roundhouse kick called neo-liberalism; an elbow strike called privatization; the full body blow of unemployment; and the referee joins in with a face stomp called the “law.” The young champ is sent to the floor.

In South Africa, the black working class majority is gripped by the rough hands of its ruling class, made up of a cold combination of black state elites and white capitalist elites, who choke the very life out of her.

How tight does this noose around our neck have to be before we choke? We do eight to five; the system works overtime to

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ensure the hungry never get fed, to make sure working class children never receive an education beyond what the system needs, and blocks access to tertiary education with financial barricades. If education is the key to being free, it's no wonder they keep the poor locked out, or our throats slit with debt.

The system suffocates, and there is really not enough space at the top; we need to make society bottom-up instead. It is far more important we empower ourselves with liberatory education, from below, embrace the lessons learnt from day-to-day struggle, building our own popular education, opening our own mind. Let us move onwards, with a revolutionary counter-culture embracing new ideas of what a better free anarchist society looks like.

And clear about the enemy we face. I present to you capitalism. Capitalism, who never travels alone: his brother, the state, next to him; his son racism to his right, and his daughter, the class system to his left. And at their feet, we, the working class: the workers, the unemployed, slaves of the factories, slaves of the offices, slaves of the mines, slaves of the shops, slaves of the system, picking up the pieces of our broken dreams, chained by a past of exploitation, racism and colonialism, blinded by the glare of a fake future promised on the billboards. Held down by the weight of our chains.

This why it is important we celebrate May Day.

The working class – all of us, white collar, blue collar, pink collar, employed and unemployed, skilled and unskilled, city and country, men and women, of all countries and peoples – have never stopped fighting back.

We have been picking up broken crayons, in the hopes of colouring in a better tomorrow for ourselves. We carry hand-me-down dreams from different tales of socialism, the dreams of freedom, of dignity, burning in our hearts, while we wear fake smiles for our masters, in-between lies. In our eyes, rests the hope of one day being able to grow into the sounds of our own laughter, where we can wear our happiness and freedom

like fitting gloves. Unbowed. Unweighted by chains. Not forgetting the past, but moving into the new land of freedom.

Capitalism, racism, sexism, and class: hammer forces, colliding trains, smashing into us, who have no life insurance, and leaving us shattered windshields for eyes. Battered and blinded, it's no wonder we'd rather march for minimum wages than a wage-less society; no wonder we constantly stumble after false solutions in "workers parties" and election promises, instead of democracy-from-below, in building our movements into a counter-power that can create a new world. No wonder we are held into separate sections of the stumbling, by continuous lines of old division and dogma.

An entire orchestra drowns in our throats: the voices of the unemployed echoing in a society with veins like guitar strings, our voices cracking, like the self-esteem of the single African mother dependant on a barely functional welfare system, our screams whispers, our dreams blazing but blinded.

In days like these it is important to remember our heroes, our champions of past years, to remember the stories of Ma Josie Mpama, who wanted nothing more, than to see the working class mature, to explode like landmines under the feet of the oppressive system that has spent centuries trampling over us.

The other day, while deep in thought, I felt the room grow more still, filled with clarity. The voice of Lucy Parsons pierced my very being. She, a labourer, a black woman, radical socialist and a mindful anarchist, had joined me in a conversation, not alone but with the likes of comrades from many sides, among them Samuel Fielden, S.P Bunting, T.W. Thibedi and Johnny Gomas.

Their voices reminded me of the dream, the obtainable goal. They reminded me that it was days like May Day, a symbolic dream, a global general strike, raised over the broken promises and bones, made by rich and powerful men carrying the flags of slavery, racism, gender oppression, exploitation, and neo-

liberalism. The flag of capitalism and all its children, and its brother, the state.

They jogged my memory, reminded me that it was up to us to create a better tomorrow, and that we can! Even if the system has us looking like we are losing the fight against a melanoma, where even chemotherapy has claimed all our dreams.

To remember that we, the working class billions, can be more than what we are now, that we can awake, from our half-life, that we can be more than the shares and stocks that the system has nailed to our backs. That we can have the audacity to breathe, that we can do more than march apologetically, hoping for concessions from our ruling class masters.

I hope we wake up from our slumber. I hope the working class remembers that without her, there is no them, no ruling class. I hope we form ranks so tight, that nothing can get through them. I hope we remember that it all belongs to us.

That ours are victories won neither by co-option or negotiation. I hope we remember why May Day is what it is, that it is more than a public holiday but a powerful reminder: of the ongoing struggle for a united, anti-capitalist, anti-statist, bottom-up, international movement, asserting the common interests of the people against the minority elites who use laws and their militarized police to keep us oppressed.

This is the time to embrace working-class unity and challenge the status quo of capitalist oppression.

May Day is a call to the global working class to unite across any and all division lines that exist; to unite across race; to unite against nationalism and to fight for a bottom-up democracy, for workers' control, one world, freedom and justice, redress of past wrongs and economic and social equality, self-management. Only then are we truly free.