

May Day and the Fight Back We Need

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On May 1st, 1886, workers across the US went on strike for the 8 hour day. In Haymarket Square in Chicago, a massacre took place. In the years that followed, May 1st became known as International Workers Day in commemoration of these events, and most nations of the world now celebrate their Labor Day on or around May Day.

Generally in the US on May Day, it is common for unions, pro-labor and workers groups to hold rallies, picnics and similar events. More recently, May Day has been significant for undocumented immigrant organizing, notably in 2006 with the Great American Boycott.

This year we gather for this rally in unity with others around the country to demonstrate in support of workplace and community rights. The past year has seen a tremendous amount of organizing the world over. From the Arab Spring to the pro-union demonstrations in Madison, WI; from European anti-austerity demonstrations to Occupy Wall St and the global Occupy movement, people have been on the move in response to the recession and its budget cuts brought on by capitalism.

And Occupy tapped into something that resonated with people the world over, but especially in the US, in many ways long dormant for broad-based social movements. Unlike the Tea Party formations of right-wingers, which it has often been likened to, Occupy encampments spread like wildfire across the country and were, and still are, supported by a broad cross-section of the population. Without cable news sponsorship to prop it up, and corporate dollars to Astroturf it, in a matter of weeks Occupy far eclipsed the mishmash of socially conservative and economically Darwinian politics known as the tea party.

In many places, like Chicago and Oakland, the local Occupy went above and beyond the calls for corporate tax increases and better financial regulatory oversight, and fought housing evictions and budget cuts with direct action. In a challenge to the rote and stale methods of top-down, non-profit organization led movement work of recent decades, Occupy's insistence on direct democracy in decision making and action outside of electoral politics has invigorated and reinvigorated new and old activists alike.

But has it been enough? What have we won? Recent political debates and legislative machinations on both national and state levels seem to show that on the contrary, we are losing ground. A century's worth of socially progressive labor, reproductive and racial justice reforms are being rolled back at an unprecedented rate. The American poor and working classes are losing what was won through generations of struggle.

Some numbers: In 2011 a record amount of anti-abortion legislation was introduced, resulting in 92 provisions restricting access to abortions in 24 states.¹ Last year also saw an attempt to completely defund Title X, which allows poor and working class women to have free or reduced cost access to reproductive health services. All of these efforts aim to severely restrict women's access to health services and safe, legal medical procedures. These also disproportionately affect women of color and poor white women, clearly making this a race and class issue as well.

But 2011 was also a record year for anti-immigrant legislation. Five states (Alabama, Georgia, Indiana, South Carolina, and Utah) passed anti-immigrant bills modeled after Arizona's 2010 law, SB 1070. In all, 164 anti-immigration laws were passed by state legislatures in 2010 and 2011.² Additionally, the Obama administration has already deported more immigrants than any previous administration in history, tearing families and communities apart and criminalizing whole populations.

Anti-union legislation is also on a runaway train of right-wing, corporate, oligarchic interests. 2011 saw the weakening or banning of public sector unions in Wisconsin, Michigan, and Indiana. This year, Indiana became the 23rd "Right-to-Work" state, and Georgia only weeks ago passed an anti-protest/anti-union bill, and the AZ state legislature is currently considering one. These efforts are aimed at reducing wages and benefits for all workers in the race to the bottom for bigger profits on the backs of workers.

At the same time, the defunding of state departments of labor has weakened already paltry recourse for workers who are unemployed, laid off, or abused by employers. Huge layoffs of public sector workers have been implemented in most states and many localities, all while corporate tax breaks and subsidies are left in place or even increased. These layoffs at state and local levels have been shown to disproportionately affect African-American and Latino workers.³

More and more people are working multiple jobs, sometimes up to 60–80 hrs a week, with no overtime and benefits, just to make ends meet, and those are some of us lucky enough to have jobs. For others, direly needed food and rental assistance, mental health services, domestic abuse services, disability funding, college tuition aid, and on and on, are all being reduced severely or even eliminated, all while more and more people require them.

In our own state, despite a more than \$500 million surplus for this fiscal year, the reinstalled governor-for-life Terry Branstad⁴ has continued the deep budget cuts initially introduced by Democratic governor Chet Culver in 2009.⁵ In many cases, like higher education, eldercare oversight and disability services, making even further cuts. Huge tax breaks and subsidies for Iowa's largest corporations continue, and both sides of the aisle are agreeing to cuts in commercial and industrial property taxes which further erode the state's income, another way of depriving public funds from needed services to line the coffers of the wealthiest.⁶

¹ www.guttmacher.org

² newamericamedia.org

³ urbanhabitat.org

⁴ Republican Terry Brandstad was governor of Iowa from 1983 – 1999, serving four consecutive terms. He was elected in 2010 to a fifth term. en.wikipedia.org

⁵ www.radioiowa.com

⁶ thegazette.com

As of 2009, the poorest families in the state paid the greatest portion of their income toward state and local taxes, at 11 percent, after federal offsets. Meanwhile, the top 1 percent of Iowa income-earners, who make an average of \$989,200, paid just 6 percent.⁷

While the profits of the wealthy continue to increase, our wages continue to stagnate or even fall and the cost of living grows ever higher. The needs of rural communities and the urban poor, college students, the disabled, the unemployed and retirees are all on the chopping block with talk of "balanced budgets," never mind the 48% of the total federal budget going to military spending.

On the social front, despite the talk of a "post-racial America," police and vigilante murders of young African-American men and teens are an all too common experience. Likewise, intimidation, violence against and murder of trans and queer people have also increased in recent years.

Much of the country was mobilized for the Million Hoodie Marches over the tragic murder of Trayvon Martin. But how many people know of the other 20 young, unarmed African-Americans killed by police so far this year?⁸ Names like Ervin Jefferson, Ramarley Graham, and Wendell Allen are much less known, and to date no charges have been filed against officers in these instances. Locally, some of us might remember the killing of John Deng in 2009, a Sudanese man killed by a plainclothes sheriff's deputy in highly suspicious circumstances with a closed investigation and likewise, no charges against the murderer.⁹

These atrocious murders are not inconsistent with our courts and prison system, which incarcerates more people than anywhere else in the world, and includes 1 in 3 black males being imprisoned at some point in their life, resulting in the life-long status of a felony record. Additionally, there is ample documentation of heavy policing of black and Latino communities, discrimination in hiring, housing and loans across the country, defunded school systems exacerbated by privatization schemes like charter schools and no child left behind policies – all of this indicates an undeniable picture of systemic and systematic racial oppression in our society.

While there have been certain gains around discrimination and same-sex marriage in some states, people of Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Transgender and Queer identities continue to be recipients of hate-based violence and murder. Reports of anti-GLBT hate violence increased by 13% from 2009 to 2010. Anti-GLBT murders increased 23% from 2009 to 2010, the second highest amount in a decade. GLBT people of color and transgender women are disproportionately murdered: in 2010, people of color comprised 70% of all GLBT murder victims, and 44% of GLBT murder victims were transgender women.¹⁰

Bullying in schools and colleges in recent years has given rise to the prevalence of suicides of several young people of GLBT identities, and only days ago gay teenager Kenneth Weishuhn of Primghar, IA took his life.

And truly, these brief examples only begin to describe the injustices we live under today.

What does this litany of social ills and oppression, all these seemingly single-issue causes have in common? Why bring all this out on May Day? Because these myriad forms of oppression and exploitation are in fact connected – they intersect with and reinforce one another. Racial divisions and religious beliefs have long been used by the ruling class to divide the working class,

⁷ cciaction.org

⁸ www.ushrnetwork.org

⁹ blackagendareport.com... or thegazette.com for differing takes

¹⁰ www.avp.org

and these divisions persist and continue to be exploited to mask our commonalities. In order for us to move forward and effect meaningful social change, in our workplaces, schools and neighborhoods, and to defend the gains made by those who came before us, we need feminist and anti-racist movements, we need movements challenging economic and class divisions, and challenging environmental degradation and environmental racism. We need these social movements which see the commonalities between these struggles and which actively and mutually oppose attacks on organized labor, communities of color, undocumented workers, LGBT communities and individuals, indigenous communities, reproductive freedoms, on the environment, and so much more.

The way is pointed forward with groups like Anti-eviction Campaigns in Chicago, Detroit and Boston, and other places; solidarity networks and workers centers challenging stolen wages and similar abuses through direct action; tenants' organizations in apartments; Copwatch groups that document policing in neighborhoods; and closer to home, the ongoing fight against cuts at University of Northern Iowa by students and teachers there.

There is a myth in our country, that through the benevolence of politicians and policy-makers who saw the plight of hard-working Americans, we were granted the social benefits we have, such as unemployment insurance, the 40-hour work week and the minimum wage, or indeed, the end to segregation and the winning of women's right to choose. This myth would seek to erase from our history the generations of struggle by American workers and the oppressed which wrought these victories from the wealthy and powerful, and the worldwide movements that threatened the capitalist system itself which won reforms and changes. Nothing less than this same struggle will bring about the change needed today.

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