

May Day – Remembering the past, fighting for tomorrow

Various authors

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A short history of May Day

The first of May is a moment for us to remember the Chicago Haymarket Martyrs of 127 years ago. These Chicago anarchists helped to lead the major battle of the day, not only for the 8 Hour Day, but also for social liberation.

The origins of May Day go back to May 4, 1886, marking the Haymarket Massacre. This memorable day began as a rally of striking workers who were demanding an eight-hour work day, climaxing with a bomb produced by an unknown individual while the police dispersed the peaceful rally. The blast and ensuing gunfire resulted in the deaths of seven police officers and at least four civilians; scores of others were wounded.

Eight anarchists were convicted of conspiracy during the legal proceedings that followed. Although the evidence was scarce, and it could not be proven that any of the eight defendants had thrown the explosive projectile, seven were sentenced to death and one to 15 years in prison. The death sentences of two of the defendants were commuted to life in prison, and another committed suicide before his hanging. The other four were hanged on November 11, 1887. In 1893, Illinois' new governor pardoned the remaining defendants and criticized the evidence that was used during trial.

Since this day, we honor those who have fought, sacrificed and died for the defense and advancement of the working class.

Present conditions

Since the events of Haymarket, we have wrestled much from the capitalist class and the state through struggle. During the past 30 years, these forces have attacked our small, yet hard-fought-for gains. Continued attacks on working conditions, increasingly precarious and low wage work, deindustrialization, and marginalization have become the new normal. Governments have imposed round after round of social austerity measures, where workers and families have been expected to swallow cuts to public funding of services so that the richest can continue to profit from the fruits of our labor.

Today's struggles/Tomorrow's struggles

Despite this grim situation, today we have much to celebrate and look forward to. Over the last year, we have seen in Québec the biggest social movements in Canadian history spearheaded by combative unions to fight against neoliberal cuts to education and for quality free education. The Chicago Teachers Union went on strike and joined with parents and community members to protect their bargaining rights and working conditions and fight school closures. Workers from various fast food chains, warehouses, car washes and superstores, which have historically been near impossible to organize into business unions, have been participating in strike actions and various direct action in the demand for better working conditions. Unionized longshore workers have been fighting to hold the line on additional concessions to the bosses in one of the last bastions of union density and shopfloor power. While we celebrate these efforts and whatever small victories gained thus far, working class victory can only come from struggles owned and

controlled by the workers themselves, not from above but from below and built with their own self-activities.

These developments within the broader labor movement are a welcome sight in comparison to what is seen by some as a decade of relative inactivity. We see it as important that the workers and community partners involved in these campaigns recognize that they are confronting head-on the relationship between the ruling and working classes, and that successfully challenging this relationship will require more than one-day strikes and solidarity rallies. It will require nothing less than workers forcefully overcoming barriers of race, migration status, gender, sexuality, and gender identity to unite as one class, bound by continuous solidarity, and always pushing forward through escalations of action.

The need for a new workers' movement

We hope this new, combative spirit by some workers invigorates a new and militant workers' movement in North America—a workers' movement that will no longer wait for politicians and bureaucrats to resolve the growing inequalities and oppressions. This spirit might bring a new wave of workers to replace the stale unionism with more democratic, combative and autonomous labor organizations which realize that laws and political institutions are put in place for the defense of the ruling class, and that only our own labor organizations, autonomous from the political institutions, can bring about the effective fighting force needed to replace the current, and build a new world.

This new workers' movement should be allied with supportive movements, such as those against cuts to social services and education, and those movements against all forms of oppression and inequality. We see the interconnectedness of various forms of oppression as we wage these struggles, along with the fights against the expansion of and brutality of police forces and prisons, the criminalization of the poor and undocumented, and the continued attacks on reproductive freedoms. As these and many other forms of oppression work in conjunction with class exploitation, we must build movements which see common interest in these struggles and which actively and mutually oppose the assaults on one another.

A new world to build

By engaging in these struggles, we gain necessary experience, initiate needed debates, and confront the current austerity agenda of the elite outside of current labor laws. Through struggle, we lay the possible foundations of a future world. Through struggle, we can as a class start to imagine and organize for a classless society and one completely emancipated from all forms of oppression. This May Day, just like every other, is a call for workers to organize against the everyday exploitation of capitalism. In the spirit of those who fought for the eight hour day, let us continue the fight for the advancement of our class.

We need to look toward building a society without power, profit, and privilege, in which working people in workplaces and communities make the decisions about how our work is done and what we want from it. We need a movement that fights for real gains within the context of this society while using its own organizations as the basis for a new one.

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