

# MAY DAY



*PILLA VIJAY*

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# CONTENT

1. May Day - ***Pilla Vijay***
2. Haymarket Monument - ***Pilla Vijay***
3. International Workers' Day - ***Pilla Vijay***
4. Revolutionary Traditions of May Day - ***B.T. Ranadive***
5. History of the working class movement in British India - ***Pilla Vijay***
6. Unorganised Workers - Issues and Challenges - ***Pilla Vijay***
7. Labour in India - ***Pilla Vijay***
8. Neo-liberal Policies - impact on working class - ***Marksist Magazine***
9. Labour laws in India - ***Pilla Vijay***
10. Proposed labour reforms in 2019 - ***Pilla Vijay***
11. Protest against labour reforms - 2019 - ***Pilla Vijay***
12. Bourgeois and Proletarians - ***Communist Manifesto***

# **MAY DAY**

## **The Workers Day, born in the struggle for the Eight-hour day**

On May 1, the world working class displays its strength in demonstrations and strikes. May Day - International Workers' Day is a reminder to the ruling classes that their days are numbered. Every year, the ruling classes around the world are again reminded of their vulnerability and of the power of the working class.

How did May 1st become a day recognized around the world as a working class holiday, a day of solidarity between workers of all nationalities? Why do the captains of finance and industry still fear the celebration of May Day?

May Day was born from the struggle for the eight-hour day. That struggle, in turn, emerged as part and parcel of the working class itself.

Working classes have existed since the development of agriculture, about ten thousand years ago. Serfs, slaves, trades people and others were forced to turn over the fruits of their labor to an exploiting class.

But the modern working class the class of "free labor", whose exploitation is hidden by the wage system is only several hundred years old. Although its exploitation is masked, it is no less brutal. Men, women and children are forced to work long hours in miserable conditions just to eke out a bare subsistence.

The origin of May Day is indissolubly bound up with the struggle for the shorter worker day-a demand of major political significance

for the working class. This struggle is manifest almost from the beginning of the factory system in the United States.

Although the demand for higher wages appears to be the most prevalent cause for the early strikes in this country, the question of shorter hours and the right to organize were always kept in the foreground when workers formulated their demands against the bosses and the government. As exploitation was becoming intensified and workers were feeling more and more the strain of inhumanly long working hours, the demand for an appreciable reduction of hours became more pronounced.

## **Unabated exploitation**

Already at the opening of the 19th century workers in the United States made known their grievances against working from “sunrise to sunset”, the then prevailing work day. Fourteen, sixteen and even eighteen hours a day were not uncommon. During the conspiracy trial against the leaders of striking cordwainers in 1806, it was brought out that workers were employed as long as nineteen and twenty hours a day.

The twenties and thirties are replete with strikes for reduction of hours of work and definite demands for a 10-hour day were put forward in many industrial centers. The organization of what is considered as the first trade union in the world, the Mechanics' Union of Philadelphia, preceding by two years the one formed by workers in England, can be definitely ascribed to a strike of building trade workers in Philadelphia in 1827 for the 10 hour day. During the bakers' strike in New York in 1834 the Workingmen's Advocate reported that “journeymen employed in the loaf bread business have for years been suffering worse than Egyptian bondage. They have had to labor on an average of eighteen to twenty hours out of the twenty-four.”

The demand in those localities for a 10-hour day soon grew into a movement, which, although impeded by the crisis of 1837, led the federal government under President Van Buren to decree the 10-hour day for all those employed on government work. The struggle for the Universality of the 10-hour day, however, continued during the next decades. No sooner had this demand been secured in a number of industries than the workers began to raise the slogan for an 8-hour day. The demand was, however, won in a few well-organized trades before the crisis. That the movement for a shorter workday was not only peculiar to the United States, but was prevalent wherever workers were exploited under the rising capitalist system, can be seen from the fact that even in far away Australia the building trade workers raised the slogan "8 hours work, 8 hours recreation and 8 hours rest" and were successful in securing this demand in 1856.

As evidence, Marx quotes a declaration from the 1866 General Congress of Labor in Baltimore: "The first and great necessity of the present, to free country from capitalist slavery, is the passing of a law by which eight hours shall be the normal working day in all States of American Union"

## **RISE OF THE DAWN**

Six years later, in 1872, a hundred thousand workers in New York City struck and won the eight-hour day, mostly for building trades workers. It was in this rising ferment for the eight-hour day that May Day was born.

The movement for the eight-hour day was wedded to the date of May 1 at an 1884 convention of the three-year-old Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions (FOTLU) of the United States and Canada the forerunner of the American Federation of Labor. George Edmonston, founder of the Brotherhood of Carpenters and

Joiners, introduced a resolution designed to crystallize labor's support for the eight-hour day:

“Resolved... that eight hours shall constitute a legal day's labor from and after May 1, 1886, and that we recommend to labor organizations throughout this district that they so direct their laws so as to conform to this resolution by the time named.”

Despite growing support, the FOTLU was too small to carry out truly national action. Instead, local committees took responsibility for building May 1 strikes and demonstrations.

The growing strength of the eight-hour movement caused a panic in the ruling class. Newspaper headlines blared warnings of “communist infiltrators.” Other bosses capitulated in fear: by April 1886, over 30,000 workers were granted the eight-hour day.

Despite the bosses' predictions of violence, the world's first May Day was a massive success, involving hundreds of thousands in peaceful strikes and demonstrations. The largest demonstration was in Chicago, where 90,000 marched—as many as 40,000 of whom were strikers. Thirty-five thousand Chicago meatpackers won the eight hour day with no loss of pay after the strikes.

## **Historic May Day Struggle**

But the event that guaranteed May Day a place in the history of the working class did not occur on May 1, but three days later at Haymarket Square in Chicago.

By May 2, the number of workers on strike in Chicago had soared to 65,000. Alarmed, representatives of industry had decided that decisive action against the workers was necessary.

During the rally, several hundred lumber workers left to join the locked-out workers at the McCormick Harvester workers, about a quarter-mile away. The McCormick workers had been locked out for three months; the plant was being run with scabs, and the lumber

workers were joining the locked-out workers to confront the scabs at shift change.

Within 15 minutes, hundreds of cops were on the scene. Spies\* and the remaining lumber workers, hearing gunshots, headed for McCormick to rein force their comrades. But a force of police intercepted them, attacking them with clubs and firing into the crowd. At least four workers were killed outright, with many other injured.



Spies immediately issued the leaflets in both English and German. One had the headline, “Revenge! Workingmen, to Arms!” and put responsibility for the atrocity at the hands of the bosses. The other called for a mass rally at Haymarket Square to denounce the police murders. On the day of the rally, May 4, the police carried out a wave of attacks, 3,000 gathered for the evening rally including the mayor, who wanted to insure that the rally remained peaceful.

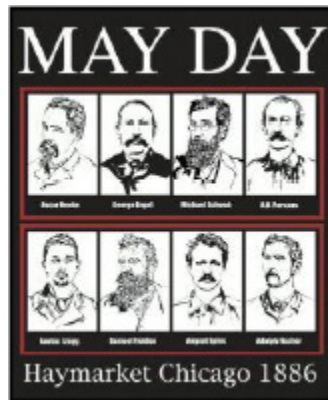
**(\*Short name of August Spies-a dynamic leader of the workers.)**

Minutes after the mayor left the rally, while Fielden was speaking, 180 cops closed in on the speakers stand demanded that the rally disperse. Fielden protested that the rally was peaceful.

Just as the police captain was giving orders to the cops, a bomb was thrown from the crowd into the ranks of the police. Sixty-six

cops were wounded; seven later died. The cops turned their guns on the workers, wounding 200 and killing several.

The newspapers and the bosses whipped up a witch hunt against militant workers especially the anarchist leaders. Seven were arrested within days Spies, Fielden, Michael Schwab, Adolph Fisher, George Engel, Louis Lingg, and Oscar Neebe. Parsons evaded a police search until he turned himself in on the day of the trial.



## **A major injustice**

The trials themselves were a classical frame-up. The prosecutors produced no evidence that any of the eight men threw the bomb, not that any of them had conspired to throw the bomb. As prosecuting Attorney Julius Grinnel said in his closing remarks, "Law is upon trial. Anarchy is on trial. These men have been selected, picked out by the grand jury and indicted because they were leaders. They are no more guilty than the thousands that follow them... Convict these men, make examples of them, hang them and save our institutions, our society."



All were sentenced to death except Neebe. Fielden and Schwab petitioned for clemency and had their sentences commuted to life in prison; 21-year-old Lingg cheated the hangman by exploding a dynamite tube in his mouth. The rest were hanged on November 11, 1887.

The image that you see on the left is the monument at the cemetery where the Martyrs of Chicago are buried. It is located in Forest Park because the Chicago City Council passed an ordinance prohibiting the Martyrs from being buried within the city limits of Chicago. The funeral procession from the Chicago court house where they were executed to the cemetery in Forest Park was the largest funeral procession in the history of Chicago.

Six years later, Illinois Gov. John Atgeld freed Neebe, Fielden and Schwab and posthumously pardoned the five executed men,

revealing that much of the evidence was phony and that the trial was charade. But the damage had been done, and not just to the Haymarket Eight.

## **Attack on labour movement**

The entire labor movement came under attack in the witch hunt; the eight-hours' strikes by- and- large collapsed, and about a third of the workers who had won the eight-hour day lost it in the month after the Haymarket incident.

In the year between the Haymarket incident and the executions, the world wide labor movement came to the defense of the accused. While the Knights of Labor officialdom took the opportunity to attack its more militant rivals, many knights locals including the Chicago Local championed the clemency campaign. The newly-founded American Federation of Labor, under Gompers, issued a public appeal for clemency. Outside the United States, workers in England, Holland, Russia, Italy, France and Spain rallied and donated funds for the defendants, Prime Minister Otto von Bismarck of Germany, alarmed by the workers' movement in defense of the Haymarket defendants, outlawed public meetings of workers.

The Haymarket incident placed the U.S. working class especially the U.S. movement for the eight hour day at center stage of the world workers' movement. So when the AFL convention in 1888 announced that May 1, 1890, would be a day when labour would enforce the eight-hour day with strikes and demonstrations, the world was listening.

## **MAY DAY SPREADS WORLDWIDE**

In 1889, over 400 delegates met in Paris on the 100th anniversary of the French revolution at the Marxist International Socialist Congress the founding meeting of the Second International.

Gompers sent a delegate with word of their call for action on May 1, 1890.

The Congress passed a resolution, introduced by the French delegate Lavigne, calling for a “great international demonstration” was to take place on May 1, 1890, “in view of the fact that such a demonstration has already been resolved upon by the American Federation of Labor.”

The call was a resounding success. On May 1, 1890, May Day demonstrations took place in the United States and most countries in Europe. Demonstrations were also held in Chile and Peru. In Havana, Cuba, workers marched in the world’s first May Day demanding the eight-hour day, equal rights for Blacks and Whites, and working-class unity.

Frederick Engels, who joined the half-million workers in Hyde Park in London on May 3, reported:

“As I write these lines, the proletariat of Europe and America is holding a review of its forces; it is mobilized for the first time as one army, under one flag, and fighting for one immediate aim: an eight-hour working day.”

While the 1889 resolution called for a one-time demonstration on May 1, the day quickly became an annual event. Around the world, workers in more and more countries marked labour’s day on May Day.

May Day was celebrated for the first time in Russia, Brazil and Ireland in 1891. By 1904, the Second International called on all socialists and trade unionists in every country to “demonstrate energetically” each May 1 “for the class demands of the proletariat, and for universal peace.”

Chinese workers celebrated their first May Day in 1920, following the Russian socialist revolution. In 1927, workers in India

observed May Day with demonstrations in Calcutta, Madras and Bombay. By the time, May Day was truly a world workers' day.

While May Day picked up momentum across the world, it lost steam in its country of origin, the United States. The AFL had begun a rightward turn as early as the aftermath of Haymarket; by 1905 it had disavowed May Day altogether, celebrating instead Labor Day on the first Monday of September sanctioned by the federal government in 1894.

From that time onwards, May Day in the United States was organized by the left wing of the labour movement, against the hostile attitude of the more conservative labor bureaucracy. In 1910, for example, the Socialist Party brought 60,000 in to the streets of New York City for May Day, including 10,000 women of the Shirt waist Makers 'Union-Five Lakhs workers marched on May Day in 1911.

In 1919, following the victory of the workers and peasants in the Soviet Union, a vicious red scare swept the U.S. May Day rallies were attacked both in the press and physically.

From 1919 onward, the success of May Day in the United States would depend on the success of the communist movement.

## **Success of May Day**

Despite its setback's in the United States, May Day is embraced by millions of workers in every country of the world as a day to raise its class demands. Its strength has been in raising demands not just of workers in a particular factory or industry, but of the working class a whole. The demands of May Day for the eight-hour day, for unity against racism and national chauvinism, against the entire capitalist class.

For that reason, May Day International workers' Day haunts the bankers and corporate barons as much as it inspires the millions of

workers who observe it. It is the day when workers take their place in the class army that will one day unseat their masters.

Above the clenched fists and red flags of the assembled ranks of workers are the last words of August spies, chiseled in stone on the monument to the Haymarket martyrs:

**“The day will come when our silence will be more powerful than the voices you are throttling today.”**

**- Pilla Vijay**

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