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Reclaim May Day!

An anarchist history

April 30, 2006

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May 1st is a day of special significance for the labour movement. While it has been hijacked in the past by the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union and elsewhere, the labour movement festival of May Day is a day of world-wide solidarity. A time to remember past struggles and demonstrate our hope for a better future. A day to remember that an injury to one is an injury to all.

The history of Mayday is closely linked with the anarchist movement and the struggles of working people for a better world. Indeed, it originated with the execution of four anarchists in Chicago in 1886 for organising workers in the fight for the eight-hour day. Thus May Day is a product of “*anarchy in action*” — of the struggle of working people using direct action in labour unions to change the world (“*Anarchism ... originated in everyday struggles*” — Kropotkin)

It began in the 1880s in the USA. In 1884, the **Federation of Organised Trades and Labor Unions of the United States and Canada** (created in 1881, it changed its name in 1886 to the **American Federation of Labor**) passed a resolution which asserted that “*eight hours shall constitute a legal day’s work from and after May*

1, 1886, and that we recommend to labour organisations throughout this district that they so direct their laws as to conform to this resolution.” A call for strikes on May 1st, 1886 was made in support of this demand.

In Chicago the anarchists were the main force in the union movement, and partially as a result of their presence, the unions translated this call into strikes on May 1st. The anarchists thought that the eight hour day could only be won through direct action and solidarity. They considered that struggles for reforms, like the eight hour day, were not enough in themselves. They viewed them as only one battle in an ongoing class war that would only end by social revolution and the creation of a free society. It was with these ideas that they organised and fought.

In Chicago alone, 400 000 workers went out and the threat of strike action ensured that more than 45 000 were granted a shorter working day without striking. On May 3, 1886, police fired into a crowd of pickets at the McCormick Harvester Machine Company, killing at least one striker, seriously wounding five or six others, and injuring an undetermined number. Anarchists called for a mass meeting the next day in Haymarket Square to protest the brutality. According to the Mayor, “*nothing had occurred yet, or looked likely to occur to require interference.*” However, as the meeting was breaking up a column of 180 police arrived and ordered the meeting to end. At this moment a bomb was thrown into the police ranks, who opened fire on the crowd. How many civilians were wounded or killed by the police was never exactly ascertained.

A reign of terror swept over Chicago. Meeting halls, union offices, printing shops and private homes were raided (usually without warrants). Such raids into working-class areas allowed the police to round up all known anarchists and other socialists. Many suspects were beaten up and some bribed. “*Make the raids first and look up the law afterwards*” was the public statement of J. Grinnell, the States Attorney, when a question was raised about search warrants.

Eight anarchists were put on trial for accessory to murder. No pretence was made that any of the accused had carried out or even planned the bomb. Instead the jury were told "*Law is on 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 who follow them. Gentlemen of the jury; convict these men, make examples of them, hang them and you save our institutions, our society.*" The jury was selected by a special bailiff, nominated by the State's Attorney and was composed of businessmen and the relative of one of the cops killed. The defence was not allowed to present evidence that the special bailiff had publicly claimed "*I am managing this case and I know what I am about. These fellows are going to be hanged as certain as death.*" Not surprisingly, the accused were convicted. Seven were sentenced to death, one to 15 years' imprisonment.

An international campaign resulted in two of the death sentences being commuted to life, but the worldwide protest did not stop the US state. Of the remaining five, one (Louis Lingg) cheated the executioner and killed himself on the eve of the execution. The remaining four (Albert Parsons, August Spies, George Engel and Adolph Fischer) were hanged on November 11th 1887. They are known in Labour history as the Haymarket Martyrs. Between 150,000 and 500,000 lined the route taken by the funeral cortege and between 10,000 to 25,000 were estimated to have watched the burial.

In 1889, the American delegation attending the International Socialist congress in Paris proposed that May 1st be adopted as a workers' holiday. This was to commemorate working class struggle and the "*Martyrdom of the Chicago Eight*". Since then Mayday has become a day for international solidarity. In 1893, the new Governor of Illinois made official what the working class in Chicago and across the world knew all along and pardoned the Martyrs because of their obvious innocence and because "*the trail was not fair*".

The authorities had believed at the time of the trial that such persecution would break the back of the labour movement. They were wrong. In the words of August Spies when he addressed the court after he had been sentenced to die:

“If you think that by hanging us you can stamp out the labour movement... the movement from which the down-trodden millions, the millions who toil in misery and want, expect salvation — if this is your opinion, then hang us! Here you will tread on a spark, but there and there, behind you — and in front of you, and everywhere, flames blaze up. It is a subterranean fire. You cannot put it out.”

At the time and in the years to come, this defiance of the state and capitalism was to win thousands to anarchism, particularly in the US itself. Since the Haymarket event, anarchists have celebrated May Day (on the 1st of May — the reformist unions and labour parties moved its marches to the first Sunday of the month). We do so to show our solidarity with other working class people across the world, to celebrate past and present struggles, to show our power and remind the ruling class of their vulnerability. As Nestor Makhno put it:

“That day those American workers attempted, by organising themselves, to give expression to their protest against the iniquitous order of the State and Capital of the propertied ...

“The workers of Chicago ... had gathered to resolve, in common, the problems of their lives and their struggles...

“Today too ... the toilers ... regard the first of May as the occasion of a get-together when they will concern themselves with their own affairs and consider the matter of their emancipation.”

anarchists demand the abolition of political authority, the state ... we advocate the communistic or co-operative methods of production.” Adolph Fischer

Anarchists stay true to the origins of May Day and celebrate its birth in the direct action of the oppressed. Oppression and exploitation breed resistance and, for anarchists, May Day is an international symbol of that resistance and power — a power expressed in the last words of August Spies, chiselled in stone on the monument to the Haymarket martyrs in Waldheim Cemetery in Chicago:

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

To understand why the state and business class were so determined to hang the Chicago Anarchists, it is necessary to realise they were considered the “leaders” of a massive radical union movement. In 1884, the Chicago Anarchists produced the world’s first daily anarchist newspaper, the **Chicagoer Arbeiter-Zeitung**. This was written, read, owned and published by the German immigrant working class movement. The combined circulation of this daily plus a weekly (**Vorbote**) and a Sunday edition (**Fackel**) more than doubled, from 13,000 per issues in 1880 to 26,980 in 1886. Anarchist weekly papers existed for other ethnic groups as well (one English, one Bohemian and one Scandinavian). As Martyr Oscar Neebe clearly argued, *“these are the crimes I have committed: I organised trade unions. I was for reduction of the hours of labour, and the education of the labouring man, and the re-establishment of ‘Die Arbeiter Zeitung’, the workingmen’ paper.”*

Anarchists were very active in the Central Labour Union (which included the eleven largest unions in the city) and aimed to make it, in the words of Albert Parsons (one of the Martyrs), *“the embryonic group of the future ‘free society.’”* The anarchists were also part of the **International Working People’s Association** (also called the **“Black International”**) which had representatives from 26 cities at its founding convention. The I.W.P.A. soon made headway among trade unions, especially in the mid-west and its ideas of direct action of the rank and file and of trade unions serving as the

instrument of the working class for the complete destruction of capitalism and the nucleus for the formation of a new society became known as the **“Chicago Idea”** (an idea which later inspired the **Industrial Workers of the World** which was founded in Chicago in 1905).

This idea was expressed in the manifesto issued at the I.W.P.A.’s Pittsburgh Congress of 1883:

“First — Destruction of the existing class rule, by all means, i.e. by energetic, relentless, revolutionary and international action.

“Second — Establishment of a free society based upon co-operative organisation of production.

“Third — Free exchange of equivalent products by and between the productive organisations without commerce and profit-mongery.

“Fourth — Organisation of education on a secular, scientific and equal basis for both sexes.

“Fifth — Equal rights for all without distinction to sex or race.

“Sixth — Regulation of all public affairs by free contracts between autonomous (independent) communes and associations, resting on a federalistic basis.”

In addition to their union organising, the Chicago anarchist movement also organised social societies, picnics, lectures, dances, libraries and a host of other activities. These all helped to forge a distinctly working-class revolutionary culture in the heart of the *“American Dream.”* The threat to the ruling class and their system was too great to allow it to continue (particularly with memories of the vast uprising of labour in 1877 still fresh. As in 1886, that revolt was also meet by state violence). Hence the

repression, kangaroo court, and the state murder of those the state and capitalist class considered “leaders” of the movement.

The Chicago anarchists, like all anarchists, were applying their ideas to the class struggle. They were forming unions organised and animated with the libertarian spirit. They saw that anarchism was not a utopian dream but rather a means of action — of (to use Bakunin’s words) *“creating not only the ideas, but also the facts of the future itself”* by means of direct action, solidarity and organising from the bottom up. That was why they were effective and why the state framed and murdered them.

On the 115th anniversary of the first May Day, we must apply our anarchist ideas to everyday life and the class struggle, inside and outside industry, in order to make anarchism a possibility. As Kropotkin put it, *“anarchism was born among the people; and it will continue to be full of life and creative power only as long as it remains a thing of the people.”*

Reclaim the anarchist spirit of May Day. Make everyday an International Day of solidarity and direct action!

“I say to you: ‘I despise you. I despise your order; your laws, your force-propped authority.’ HANG ME FOR IT!” Louis Lingg

“The existing economic system has placed on the markets for sale man’s natural rights ... A free-man is not for sale or for hire” Albert Parsons

“You may pronounce the sentence upon me, honourable judge, but let the world know that in A.D. 1886, in the State of Illinois, eight men were sentenced to death because they believed in a better future; because they had not lost their faith in the ultimate victory of liberty and justice!” August Spies

“every anarchist is a socialist but every socialist is not necessarily an anarchist ... the communistic