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May Day

An American — And Libertarian! — Holiday

Kevin Carson

April 30th, 2014

Americans have been conditioned to think of May Day as a “commie holiday,” one associated until recently with military parades in Red Square and leaders of Marxist-Leninist regimes exchanging “fraternal greetings” in the names of their respective peoples. They might be surprised to learn it was originally an American holiday, created by Chicago workers in commemoration of the eight-hour day campaign and the Haymarket Martyrs.

Perhaps even more surprising — as much so to modern American libertarians as anyone else — is the fact that May Day is part of the free market libertarian movement’s heritage. That’s counter-intuitive for obvious reasons. Since the time of Mises and Rand, American libertarianism has generally been identified — often justifiably — with a reflexive defense of capitalism and big business. But despite the rightward political shift of the free market movement in the 20th century, there was a very large free market Left in the 19th century, frequently with close ties to the labor and socialist movements.

Classical liberalism had common Enlightenment roots, overlapping considerably in its origins with the early socialist

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Retrieved Sept 9, 2022, from c4ss.org/content/26825

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movement. A broad current of thinkers, like the British Thomas Hodgskin and the American individualist anarchists (or Boston anarchists) around Benjamin Tucker and *Liberty* magazine, belonged within both the free market libertarian and libertarian socialist camps. In their view capitalism was a system in which the state intervened in the market on behalf of landlords and other rentiers, enforcing the artificial property rights, monopolies and artificial scarcities from which profit, interest and rent derived. They saw the proper goal of socialism as abolition of these monopolies, allowing market competition in the supply of capital and land to drive the assorted rents derived from them down to zero, so that the natural market wage of labor would be its full product.

So perhaps it's not so surprising after all that many of these thinkers would have close ties with, or be active participants in, the American socialist and labor movements. Benjamin Tucker himself, although a self-described socialist, was fairly lukewarm toward labor organization. He saw the chief avenues of action as organizing against absentee landlords and setting up interest-free mutual banks, and took an agnostic view of whatever particular forms of association people might choose in an economy free of such monopolies.

But several members of the Boston anarchist group and the *Liberty* circle were active participants in the New England Labor Reform League or William Sylvius's National Labor Union, and later in the American Labor Reform League. There was also a significant contingent of individualists in the International Working People's Association (formed by anarchists who withdrew from the First International as it became increasingly dominated by Marx's followers), and in the nationwide movement and general strike for the eight-hour day. Some leading individualists involved in socialist and labor politics included Ezra Heywood, William Greene, J.K. Ingalls and Stephen Pearl Andrews.

Individualists like Dyer Lum later attempted to build bridges with the radical labor movement. Lum tried to fuse the individualist framework of economic analysis with radical labor activism. He was closely involved with the Knights of Labor and AFL. Lawrence Labadie went on to promote individualist anarchist and mutualist ideas within industrial unions — first in the Western Federation of Miners and then in the Wobblies.

The popular association of May Day with Marxist-Leninist parties and state communist regimes reflects an overwhelming ideological victory for the apologists of corporate capitalism in the 20th century. The ideological counter-offensive began with the cult of “Old Glory” and the Pledge of Allegiance in the 1890s, continued with the movement for “Americanization” within workplaces and public schools, and culminated in the War Hysteria and Red Scare of the Wilson administration and the brown-shirt terror tactics of the American Legion, Klan and local Red Squads.

This ideological victory was associated with another, largely contemporaneous victory: The association of “free markets” and “free enterprise” with corporate capitalism in the public mind, and the belief (also promoted by the authoritarian managerialists of the “progressive” movement who went on to steal the name “liberal”) that the regulatory state and big business are adversaries rather than allies.

Today is an excellent time not only to reclaim May Day as a quintessentially American holiday, entirely compatible with the love of liberty, but to reclaim free markets as the enemy of corporate power and capitalism.