

Why May Day matters to Malawi

...History with anarchist roots

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1 May 2013

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Introduction

When we celebrate May Day, we rarely reflect on why it is a public holiday in Malawi or elsewhere. We want to share the powerful struggles that lie behind its existence and the organisations that created it and kept its meaning alive. May Day, international workers day, started as a global general strike commemorating five anarchist labour organisers executed in 1887 in the US. Mounting the scaffold, August Spies declared:

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

Anarchist* roots

May Day’s roots in the revolutionary workers’ movement are often forgotten. It arose from the anarchist movement – anarchism is often misunderstood. Anarchists such as Spies wanted society to be run by the ordinary workers and farmers, not capitalists or State officials. In place of the masses being ruled and exploited from above, society and workplaces should be run through people’s councils and assemblies, based on participatory democracy and self-management.

Anarchism was a global mass movement from the 1870s, including in the USA. Its stress on struggle from below for a radically democratic socialist society appealed to the oppressed in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Europe and the Americas.

The 1880s USA looked like China today: massive factories, poverty, slums, and the oppressed working class under the boots of the powerful, wealthy elite. Anarchist workers fought back. They were central to the US-wide general strike of May 1 1886, involving 300 000 workers. Unions demanded the eight-hour working day and justice for the masses.

Storm centre

Chicago was the storm centre: the third largest US city where the elite flaunted its wealth in the face of poor American and immigrant workers. Chicago saw the largest 1 May demonstrations, against the backdrop of terrible working conditions and poverty, worsened by economic depression.

The power of the Chicago movement rested not just on numbers, but also on revolutionary ideas. It was the anarchist International Working People’s Association (IWPA) that led the massive march of 80 000 people through Chicago, growing during the following days to 100 000.

IWPA leadership included black women like ex-slave Lucy Parsons, immigrant workers like Spies and Americans like Oscar Neebe and Albert Parsons.

Its Pittsburgh Proclamation called for ‘the destruction of class rule through energetic, relentless, revolutionary and international action’ and ‘equal rights for all without distinction of sex or race.’

Internationalist in outlook, the IWPA and the Chicago-based anarchist Central Labour Union (CLU) it led, fought for all working and poor people, regardless of race or nationality. It published

14 newspapers, organised armed self-defence and mass movements, and created a rich tapestry of revolutionary counter-culture like music.

Anarchists rejected elections in favour of mass organising and education. Elections, the IWPA said, achieved nothing much: the State was part of the system of elite rule; politicians were corrupted into the ruling elite. Instead, most IWPA activists stressed unions as the basis for genuine workers' and farmers' democracy: unions should undertake factory occupations, leading to an anarchist (free) society.

Haymarket martyrs

On May 3, Chicago strikers fought with scabs; police killed two strikers; the IWPA called a mass protest against police brutality at Haymarket Square. Here, an unknown person threw a bomb at police, who then shot dead many workers.

The Chicago elite used the clash to crackdown on anarchists. After a blatantly biased trial, eight anarchists were convicted of murder, falsely blamed against all evidence for the bombing.

Spies, Albert Parsons, George Engel and Adolph Fischer were hanged in 1887. Louis Lingg committed suicide instead. Samuel Fielden, Neebe and Michael Schwab got life sentences.

Rebuilding, anarchists and other socialists formed the Labour and Socialist International in 1889. This proclaimed May Day as Workers Day, a global general strike to commemorate the Haymarket Martyrs, fight for eight-hours, and build global workers unity.

So May Day began as an example of globalisation-from-below. And it continues to be a rallying point for workers everywhere, facing social and economic injustices 120 years on.

Struggles in Malawi

Malawians played an important role in unions in South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Famously, Clements Kadalie spear-headed the anarchist-influenced 100 000-strong Industrial and Commercial Workers Union.

In Malawi itself, unions can be dated to 1945, when the truck drivers and anti-colonial activists, Lawrence Makata and Lali Lubani, set up a Transport and General Workers Union, the Magalimoto. This was in the context of Blantyre City strikes by teachers, sanitation workers, domestic servants and rail workers.

While the British State rolled out labour reforms in its colonies from the 1940s, the aim was to contain unionism. Repression remained common, especially against politicised unions. Unions heaved a sigh of relief at Malawi's self-government (1963) and independence (1964). They had suffered heavily, especially during the 1959 State of Emergency.

But while unions enjoyed cordial relations with the Malawi Congress Party (MCP) during the independence struggle, relations turned sour in 1964 as President Hastings Banda cracked down. When unions seemed to support 'dissident' Cabinet ministers, 14 out of 19 were de-registered. In 1965, Banda's MCP placed unions under direct party control, a step to creating the one-party State, with Banda as President-for-Life.

Rejuvenated unionism

The 1980s IMF/World Bank-sponsored Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) imposed by Malawi's elite, plus 1990s pro-democracy struggles across Africa, rejuvenated unionism.

On April 6 1992, veteran unionist, Chakufwa Chihana, shook the country by openly challenging the one-party State at Chileka Airport, upon return from South Africa. His arrest sparked a strike wave, starting on May 5. In 1993, the civil service experienced two mass strikes in health, education and transport for better wages and conditions.

The strikes met severe repression, echoing the US Haymarket events. In 1992 and 1993, dozens of workers were injured or detained by State security forces; others were killed. Finally, the MCP regime was forced from below to start respecting freedom of association and to loosen its grip on unions.

Malawi's May Days

Under the one-party State, May Day was not a public holiday nor could unions organise independent May Days.

So, the first May Day in independent Malawi was in 1994. Held at the Ryalls Hotel in Blantyre just two weeks before the first multiparty general elections, and 11 months after a referendum in favour of elections, it was organised by the Hotels and Food Workers Union. Held, however, at a luxury hotel, without publicity and in the wake of State repression of dissidents and strikers, the event was poorly attended.

May Day became an official public holiday in 1995 under the newly-elected United Democratic Front (UDF) government – which included Chihana as Second Vice-President.

That year, the Trade Union Congress of Malawi (TUCM) held a widely publicised series of May Day activities at Kamuzu Stadium and a peaceful march. The then minister of Labour, Ziliro Chibambo, was present, as were employer representatives. When the minister saluted workers' contributions to the independence and democracy struggles, promising to defend workers, the mammoth crowd jubilantly ululated.

That same minister was, however, lambasted by the UDF government, after investors complained bitterly of his speech. By the 1996 May Day commemorations, a new minister of Labour was in office. And only from 2004 did the State President start attending May Day events.

Today, tomorrow

While parliamentary democracy in Malawi and the reintroduction of free unionism, mark major advances for the working class, many problems remain.

SAP-style neo-liberal policies remain; many work for low wages or on small plots, and have in reality very little say over major issues; restrictions on free speech remain; police often use excessive force. In the SADC region and Malawi in particular, an 8-hour day is still not a reality.

Conclusion: May Day today

The Haymarket Tragedy remains a symbol of countless struggles against capitalism, the State and oppression. Freedoms won in recent times rest on the sacrifices of martyrs like the IWPA anarchists, and the Malawian workers of 1959, 1992 and 1993.

May Day is a symbol of the unshakeable power of working class solidarity, and of remembrance for martyrs. It can serve as a rallying point for new anti-capitalist, participatory-democratic left resistance.

We need to defend and extend the legacy of the Haymarket affair, and to build the working class as a power-from-below for social change.

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Retrieved on 11th April 2021 from www.anarkismo.net
Published in *The Nation*, Labour Day Supplement, (Malawi), pp. 11–12.

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