

Why May Day matters

History with Anarchist Roots

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Contents

Anarchist roots	3
American militants	4
May Day in South Africa	5
Communists and May Day	5
May Day under apartheid	6
May Day today	6

When we celebrate May Day we seldom know or reflect on why it is a holiday in South Africa and in many parts of the world. Sian Byrne, Warren McGregor and Lucien van der Walt tell the story of powerful struggles that lie behind its existence and of the organisations that both created it and kept its meaning alive.

Faced with neo-liberal globalisation, the broad working class movement is being forced to globalise-from-below. Working class internationalism is nothing new; we need to learn from the past.

May Day or international workers day started as a global general strike to commemorate five anarchist labour organisers executed in the United States in 1887. Mounting the scaffold, August Spies declared: 'if you think that by hanging us, you can stamp out the labor 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.'

Anarchists stressed the self-emancipation of the masses by building revolutionary counter-power. This meant mass organisations against the state as the basis for a new participatory democratic society. Syndicalism was one approach which entailed building revolutionary trade unions.

Counterpower, plus conscientisation or revolutionary counterculture, would create a new world in the shell of the old.

In every country, May Day became a day of resistance, linking local struggles to the global picture. In South Africa, it became a powerful symbol of black working class struggle against apartheid.

Today, May Day is in danger of becoming an election rally and festival, rather than a day of struggle. May Day needs to be linked back to its anarcho-syndicalist roots with the idea that the working class in a mass movement like trade unions, can organise internationally, build counter-power and counterculture and create socialism-from-below based on participatory democracy and self-management.

Anarchist roots

While international workers day is well-known, its roots in the revolutionary workers' movement are often forgotten.

The US of the 1880s looked a lot like the China of today with massive factories, widespread poverty, and an oppressed and impoverished working class under the heel of a wealthy elite that flaunted its wealth in the midst of suffering.

On May 1, 1886 over 300 000 workers went on strike across the country. The unions had called for a massive demonstration to win the 8-hour working day, and to roll back capitalism.

Chicago was the third largest city in the US where a wealthy financial and political elite lived side-by-side with the working poor, both Americans and immigrants. The city held the largest demonstrations, against the backdrop of decades of terrible working conditions, mass poverty and sprawling slums, made worse by two economic depressions.

The power of the Chicago movement also rested on its revolutionary ideas. The anarchist International Working People's Association (IWPA) led a massive march of 80 000 people through the city. Over the next few days, the ranks of peaceful protestors swelled to 100 000.

By the 1870s anarchism emerged internationally as a mass movement. Its stress on popular struggle was appealing to the oppressed, and to emerging mass movements in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Europe and the Americas. The IWPA, active across the US from 1881, included in its leadership black women like the ex-slave Lucy Parsons, militant immigrants like Spies, and Americans like 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 Central Labour Union fought for the rights of all working and poor people. The IWPA published 14 newspapers, organised armed self-defence units, and created a rich tapestry of culture, music and mass organising.

It rejected elections in favour of direct action. Elections it believed were a futile collaboration with the state which formed part of the system of injustice which was bound to corrupt even the best radicals. The focus was revolution from below, through counter-power and counterculture, for a libertarian, socialist, self-managed society.

American militants

IWPA anarchists led Chicago's Central Labour Union (CLU). Most IWPA supporters insisted trade unions could become workers councils and assemblies, and that they could democratically run workplaces. They believed unions should fight today and make revolution tomorrow. This 'Chicago idea' was later called anarcho-syndicalism and it was integral to the global anarchist movement.

On Monday, May 3, workers who had been on strike since February fought with scabs. The police attacked the strikers, killing two. Then an IWPA mass protest at the Haymarket Square was charged by police. A bomb was thrown, hitting the police. Who threw the bomb was never known. The police opened fire, killing an unknown number.

The local state then arrested eight leading Chicago anarchists. After a biased trial, where evidence in favour of the accused was suppressed, they were convicted of murder and blamed for the bombing. Some of the defendants had not even been at Haymarket, and some not even in Chicago.

Five of the accused, August Spies, Albert Parsons, George Engel and Adolph Fischer were hanged in 1887. A sixth man, Louis Lingg, took his own life in a final act of defiance against the state. The remaining three, Samuel Fielden, Oscar Neebe and Michael Schwab received life sentences, but were pardoned six years later.

In 1889, anarchists and other socialists formed a new Labour and Socialist International (the Second International). At its founding congress, it proclaimed May 1 as Workers Day which should become a global general strike to commemorate the Haymarket Martyrs, to fight for an 8-hour day, and to build global labour unity.

So May Day began as an example of globalisation-from-below.

May Day in South Africa

In South Africa, May Day was shaped by its emergence in a capitalist order built on colonial relations.

May Day 1892 saw the launch of the first Johannesburg 'Trades Council' (or cross-industry local). But the early Witwatersrand unions were whites-only affairs, which usually endorsed racial segregation. Even so, they fought many bitter class battles.

The government felt no racial loyalty to whites. The mass strikes of 1907, 1914 and 1922 by white workers were defeated by scabs, the police, martial law and the army. The 1913 strike succeeded in forcing the state to consider a 'Workers Charter', but over 25 workers were shot dead in Johannesburg. (The Charter was never implemented).

Meanwhile, an anarchist/syndicalist current emerged locally. The first May Day in Cape Town was in 1904. It was organised by the city's unions and the local Social Democratic Federation (SDF), and it included coloured workers: some Cape unions were integrated., despite its name, the SDF was usually led by anarchists. The SDF helped form the first racially integrated general union and mass unemployed demonstrations by Africans, coloureds and whites.

The syndicalist International Socialist League (ISL), formed in 1915 in Johannesburg, aimed to create One Big Union of all workers, regardless of race, to overthrow capitalism and the state and end the national oppression of people of colour. It formed the Industrial Workers of Africa which was the first union for Africans in Britain's African empire and included Africans T.W. Thibedi, Fred Cetiwe and Hamilton Kraai. Thus, the Chicago Idea took root in Johannesburg.

The ISL declared at its first congress in 1916 that 'the emancipation of the working class required the abolition of all forms of native indenture, compound and passport systems and the lifting of the native worker to the political and industrial status of the white.' It organised syndicalist unions amongst people of colour, in Durban, Cape Town, Johannesburg and Kimberley, and worked with the SA Native National Congress (later the ANC) and the African People's Organisation.

In 1917 the ISL organised a joint May Day rally in Johannesburg with the Transvaal Native Congress. This was the first local May Day that included African speakers, among them Horatio Mbele. In 1918, the ISL's May Day was in Ferreirastown, Johannesburg which was the first local May Day focusing on people of colour.

Communists and May Day

In 1921, the SDF and ISL helped form the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) and the early CPSA had a syndicalist faction.

The CPSA continued the SDF and ISL tradition of using May Day to organise large multi-racial events where demands around class exploitation and national oppression were raised.

In 1922, the CPSA demanded that May Day become a paid public holiday. This demand was taken up by the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union of Africa (ICU), which was heavily influenced by syndicalism. The ICU advocated in its 1925 constitution for a general strike and 'abolishing the Capitalist Class'.

The state was reluctant to legalise May Day despite in 1928, African workers marching in their thousands, inspired by the CPSA.

In the 1930s, conservative registered unions, based amongst whites, Coloureds and Indians, held May Day but ignored the oppressed African majority. However, the CPSA and other unions held numerous integrated rallies, often supporting the Soviet Union (repression in the USSR was not well known at the time).

In 1937, a massive May Day by the South African Trades and Labour Council and the Cape Federation of Labour Unions supported the struggle against fascism, against the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, and for the Spanish Revolution led by anarchists.

In the 1940s, the CPSA led major unions, and held large May Day events. The ANC was then far smaller than the CPSA.

May Day under apartheid

May Day was closely linked to the struggle against apartheid. The Nationalist government banned the CPSA in July 1950 and the last mass May Day under apartheid in 1950, was a general strike by the ANC and CPSA. In Cape Town, workers protesting the pass system were attacked by the police and in Johannesburg police killed 18 marchers.

The SA Congress of Trade Unions (Sactu) was formed in 1955 and resolved to continue to organise May Days. Sactu however had collapsed under the pressure of state harassment by 1964.

The new unions of the 1970s brought May Day back. In 1985, some unions won the day off, and those that didn't, simply took it off. May Day as a paid holiday formed part of Cosatu's (Congress of South African Trade Unions) Living Wage Campaign demands and workers set May Day 1986, the 100th anniversary of the Chicago strikes as their target. This was hugely supported and the state was finally forced to declare May Day as a holiday in 1990.

May Day today

The events of the Haymarket tragedy are defining moments for workers around the world, a symbol of countless struggles against capitalism, the state and oppression. No victories are possible without the struggles of those that came before. Freedoms won in recent times rest on the sacrifices of selfless martyrs like the IWPA anarchists.

May Day is a symbol of working class solidarity and unity, of remembrance and commemoration.

It is also a celebration of the unshakable power of the working class united, and the culture of resistance that it has carved out for itself in the long history of its existence. May Day must again serve as a rallying point for the new anti-capitalist, participatory-democratic left resistance. In our own country, even the 8-hour day is not a reality for the majority. We need to defend and extend the legacy of the Haymarket affair.

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