

May 1 and a General Strike for the 8-Hour Day

May 1, International Workers' Day, commemorates the historic struggle of working people throughout the world, and is recognized in every country, except the United States and Canada. This is despite the fact that the holiday began in the 1880s in the United States, with the fight for an 8-hour work day led by immigrant workers. The recent historic marches and protests for immigrant rights, which began with "El Gran Paro Americano 2006" (The Great American Boycott), have brought back into our memories May 1 as an important day of struggle. Although the history of the day has largely been forgotten in the U.S., it is still actively remembered and celebrated today by workers, unionists and oppressed peoples all over the world. In fact you can still walk through neighborhoods in Mexico and find streets named in commemoration, such as Calle Los Mártires de Chicago in Oaxaca City.

In 1884, the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions passed a resolution stating that 8 hours would constitute a legal day's work from and after May 1, 1886. The resolution called for a general strike (meaning a strike of all workers at all workplaces) to achieve the goal, since years of lobbying and legislative methods had already failed. With workers being forced to work ten, twelve, and fourteen hours a day, rank-and-file support for the 8-hour movement grew rapidly, despite the indifference and hostility of many union officials. By April 1886, 250,000 workers across the U.S. were involved in the May Day movement.

The heart of the movement was in Chicago, organized primarily by the anarchist International Working People's Association, which believed in using education and direct action to create a free and revolutionary society based on the end of capitalism, the end of inequality based on class, race, and sex, and where working and oppressed peoples and communities were able to participate and have a meaningful voice in society. Their movement was based in the working class immigrant communities of the city, mainly among Germans, and was centered around a vibrant radical community that included daily and weekly newspapers in several languages, cultural clubs, youth groups, choirs, sports teams and especially labor unions.

By May 1, 1886 the movement had already won gains for many Chicago clothing cutters, shoemakers, and packing-house workers. Many participated in strikes and hundreds of thousands—estimated between 300,000 and 1 million—participated in marches and parades on that day. But on May 3, police fired into a crowd of strikers at the McCormick Reaper Works Factory, killing four and wounding many. Anarchists called for a mass meeting the next day in Haymarket Square to protest the brutality of the police.

The meeting proceeded without incident, and by the time the last speaker was on the platform, the rainy gathering was already breaking up, with only a few hundred people remaining. It was then that 180 cops marched into the square and ordered the meeting to disperse. As the speakers climbed down from the platform, a bomb was thrown at the police (by someone unknown to this day), killing one and injuring seventy. Police responded by indiscriminately firing into the crowd and on fellow officers, killing one worker and injuring many others. The event became known as the Haymarket Affair.

Martial law was declared. Hundreds of trade union activists and political dissidents were hunted down and jailed. Eight innocent union activists were charged with conspiracy to murder. In a sham trial full of fabricated evidence five of them were sentenced to death by hanging. The press loudly applauded. Their only crimes were holding dissident political views and trying to organize workers.

In 1889 North American trade unionists traveled to Paris to attend the congress of the Labor and Socialist International. Delegates heard about the struggle for the 8-hour day and resolved to organize worldwide demonstrations on May 1 so that in all countries on one appointed day workers would demand the legal reduction of the working day. In 1891 the International added that it must also serve as a demonstration on behalf of the demands to improve working conditions, and to ensure peace among the nations.

May Day is a part of our history, a day for new beginnings and a the day to show that we workers have more in common with each other than we do with those who would rule over us.

*—Adapted from Adam Welch, Bay Area IWW, and from the Windsor, Ontario IWW
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