

THE HISTORY OF MAY DAY AND WORKERS' RIGHTS



Around the world the 1st May is celebrated as an annual festival of workers' rights and solidarity.

Originally the day was a pagan celebration of the return of summer. Persecution of May Day began in the 17th century when European rulers backed by the churches attempted to ban the celebrations as being immoral. However many of the traditions continued as the European peasantry had stronger ties to each other and to nature than they had to their rulers and the churches.

In the nineteenth century as the industrial revolution spread around the world, men, women and children endured very long working days, often twelve hours or more. The idea of having a workers' holiday celebration was born in Australia. In 1856 Australian workers organised a day of complete stoppage of work together with speeches and entertainment as a demonstration in favour of an eight hour working day.

Thirty years on in the United States on 3rd May 1886, Chicago police opened fire on unarmed strikers, killing 6 and wounding many more. The following day Chicago workers gathered in Haymarket Square to demonstrate against continuing police brutality. As the police attempted to clear the square, a bomb exploded, killing 7 policemen.

In a show trial 8 anarchist leaders were convicted of murder even although only one of them was present at the time of the blast and he was addressing the crowd. Four of the leaders were executed, one took his own life in prison; 3 others were later pardoned.

The executed Chicago trade unionists became known as the Haymarket Martyrs. Outrage at the killings spread around the world. In 1889 an international gathering of socialists and communists

(the Second International) decided to commemorate the Haymarket Martyrs by organising mass demonstrations throughout Europe and America. From 1890 onwards workers throughout the world have adopted May Day as a day of International Workers Solidarity, fighting for the right to celebrate their past and to build a future free from oppression and exploitation.

The campaign for an eight-hour working day was at the heart of the early May Day protests. It was a time when unorganised workers were joining unions and combining in collective struggle for workers' rights. Eleanor Marx was deeply involved in unionising women workers and played a key role in organising the first May day rally in London. It proved impossible to get agreement on a single rally and she worried that numbers would be low.

In the event 3000 marched on May 1st and a quarter of a million rallied to Hyde Park 3 days later!

May Day rallies took off strongly in Scotland. In 1891 between eight and ten thousand rallied at Glasgow Green. Glasgow Socialist Harry McShane writing in the early years of the twentieth century observed how the demonstrations were always very colourful, 'everyone wore red ties and red sashes'. McShane also noted that women were always prominent in the May Day demonstrations – they seemed to have less hesitation about wearing their colours – and when the real street movements grew up they were very active. In the 1915 rent strike and the unemployed movements of the twenties and thirties, women showed just how much they could do.

As well as campaigning for workers' rights there has always been a strong tradition of international solidarity on May Day. At the Glasgow Rally in 1915 speeches were made in Russian, Yiddish, Lithuanian and Polish – red bow ties were sold to raise funds to help political prisoners in Russia.

Today the tradition of May Day continues. Battles over workers' rights, women's rights and human rights more generally remain just as relevant today – in Scotland and around the world.

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