

# Why May Day matters

## History with anarchist roots

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.

**F**aced 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 counterpower. This meant mass organisation 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 counterpower 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 1 May 1886 over 300 000 workers went on strike across the country. The unions had called for a massive demonstration to win the eight-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 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 had 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

