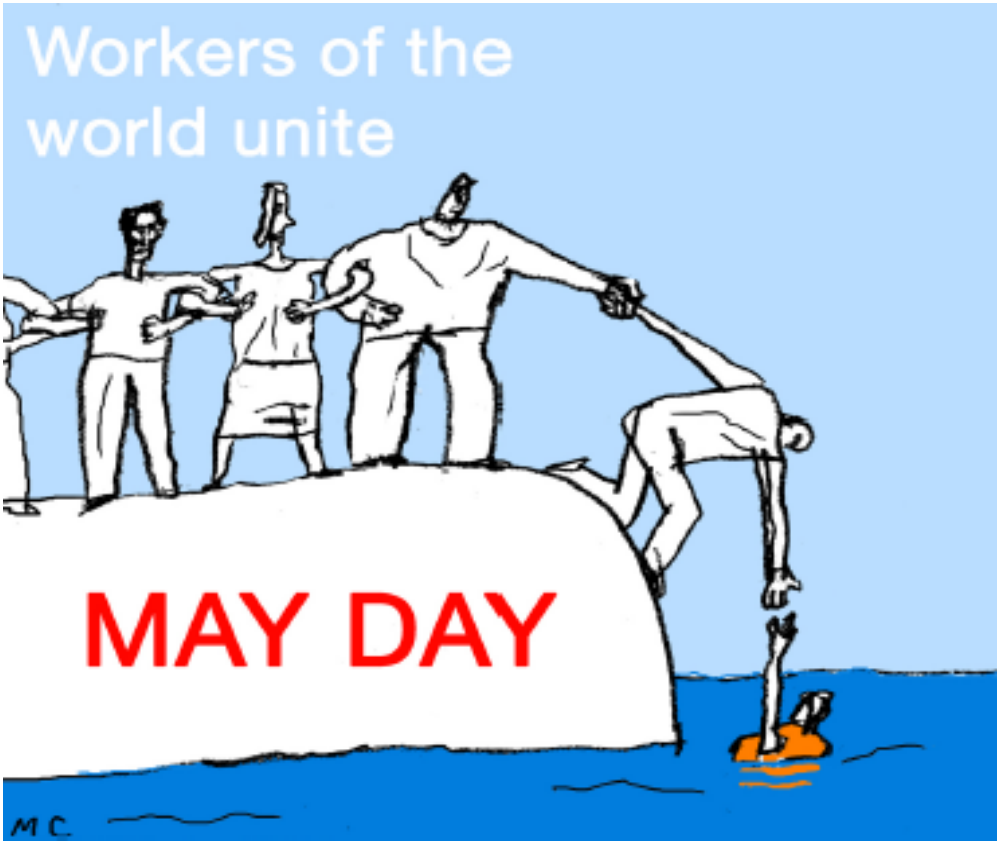
# May Day

## Workers' Struggles, International Solidarity, Political Aspirations



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# **May Day**: Workers' Struggles, International Solidarity, Political Aspirations

# Speech on the first May Day Hyde Park, 4 May 1890

## Eleanor Marx

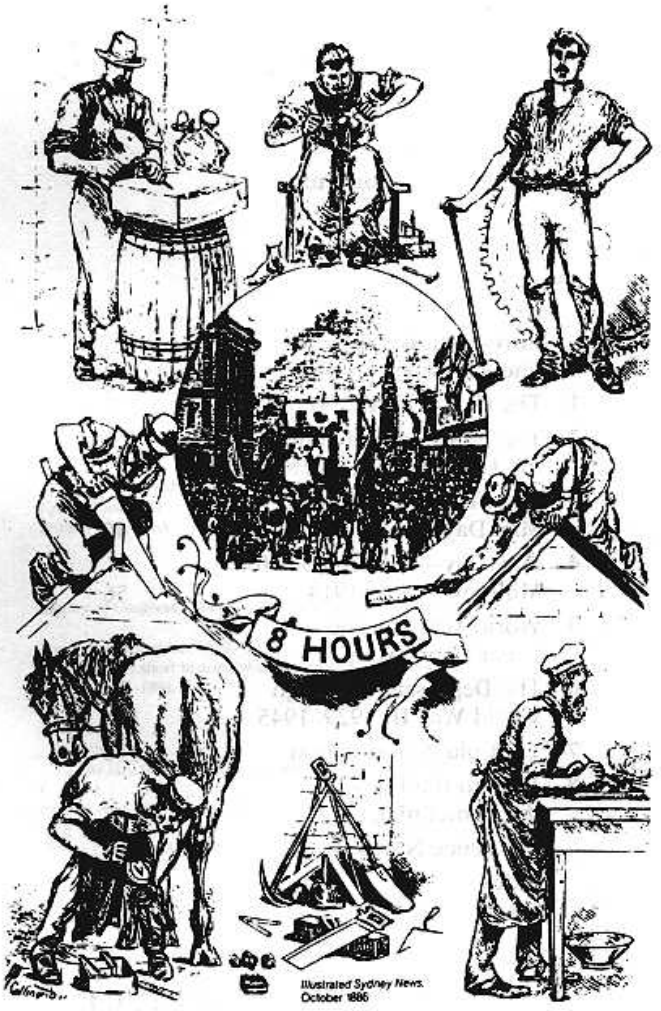
We have not come to do the work of political parties, but we have come here in the cause of labour, in its own defence, to demand its own rights. I can remember when we came in handfuls of a few dozen to Hyde Park to demand an Eight Hours' Bill, but the dozens have grown to hundreds, and the hundreds to thousands, until we have this magnificent demonstration that fills the park today. We are standing face to face with another demonstration, but I am glad to see that the great masses of the people are on our side. Those of us who have gone through all the worry of the Dock Strike, and especially the Gasworkers' Strike, and have seen the men, women and children stand round us, have had enough of strikes, and we are determined to secure an eight hours' day by legal enactment; unless we do so, it will be taken from us at the first opportunity. We will only have ourselves to blame if we do not achieve the victory which this great day could so easily give us.

There is in the park this afternoon a man whom Mr. Gladstone once imprisoned – Michael Davitt; but Mr. Gladstone is now on the best of terms with him. What do you suppose is the reason for the change? Why has the Liberal Party been so suddenly converted to Home Rule? Simply because the Irish people sent 80 members to the House of Commons to support the Conservatives; in the same way we must kick these Liberal and Radical members out if they refuse to support our programme.

I am speaking this afternoon not only as a Trade Unionist, but as a Socialist. Socialists believe that the eight hours' day is the first and most immediate step to be taken, and we aim at a time when there will no longer be one class supporting two others, but the unemployed both at the top and at the bottom of society will be got rid of. This is not the end but only the beginning of the struggle; it is not enough to come here to demonstrate in favour of an eight hours' day. We must not be like some

Christians who sin for six days and go to church on the seventh, but we must speak for the cause daily, and make the men, and especially the women that we meet, come into the ranks to help us.

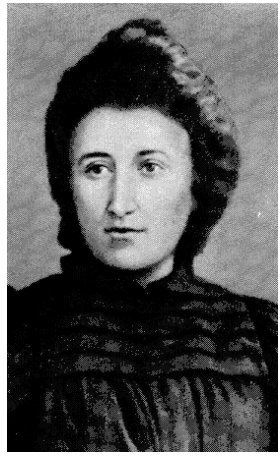
"Rise like Lions after slumber
In unvanquishable number,
Shake your chains to earth like dew
Which in sleep had fallen on you–
Ye are many–they are few." •



# What Are the Origins of May Day? (1894)

## Rosa Luxemburg

The happy idea of using a proletarian holiday celebration as a means to attain the eight-hour day was first born in Australia. The workers there decided in 1856 to organize a day of complete stoppage together with meetings and entertainment as a demonstration in favor of the eight-hour day. The day of this celebration was to be April 21. At first, the Australian workers intended this only for the year 1856. But this first celebration had such a strong effect on the proletarian masses of Australia, enlivening them and leading to new agitation, that it was decided to repeat the celebration every year.



In fact, what could give the workers greater courage and faith in their own strength than a mass work stoppage which they had decided themselves? What could give more courage to the eternal slaves of the factories and the workshops than the mustering of their own troops? Thus, the idea of a proletarian celebration was quickly accepted and, from Australia, began to spread to other countries until finally it had conquered the whole proletarian world.

The first to follow the example of the Australian workers were the Americans. In 1886 they decided that May 1 should be the day of universal work stoppage. On this day 200,000 of them left their work and demanded the eight-hour day. Later, police and legal harassment prevented the workers for many years from repeating this [size] demonstration. However in 1888 they renewed their decision and decided that the next celebration would be May 1, 1890.

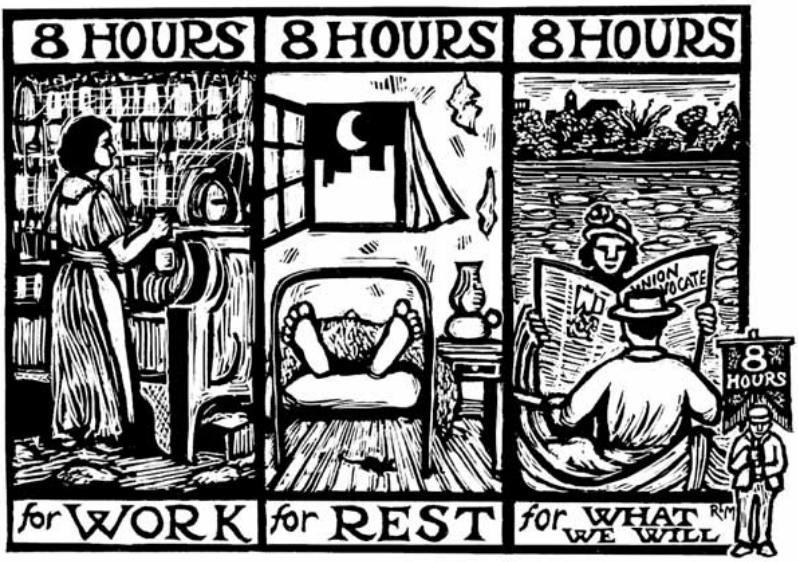
In the meanwhile, the workers' movement in Europe had grown strong and animated. The most powerful expression of this movement occurred at the International Workers' Congress in 1889. At this Congress, attended by four hundred delegates, it was decided that the eight-hour day must be the first demand. Whereupon the delegate of the French unions, the worker Lavigne from Bordeaux, moved that this demand be expressed in all countries through a universal work stoppage. The delegate of the American workers called attention to the decision of his

comrades to strike on May 1, 1890, and the Congress decided on this date for the universal proletarian celebration.

In this case, as thirty years before in Australia, the workers really thought only of a one-time demonstration. The Congress decided that the workers of all lands would demonstrate together for the eight-hour day on May 1, 1890. No one spoke of a repetition of the holiday for the next years. Naturally no one could predict the lightning-like way in which this idea would succeed and how quickly it would be adopted by the working classes. However, it was enough to celebrate the May Day simply one time in order that everyone understand and feel that May Day must be a yearly and continuing institution [...].

The first of May demanded the introduction of the eight-hour day. But even after this goal was reached, May Day was not given up. As long as the struggle of the workers against the bourgeoisie and the ruling class continues, as long as all demands are not met, May Day will be the yearly expression of these demands. And, when better days dawn, when the working class of the world has won its deliverance then too humanity will probably celebrate May Day in honor of the bitter struggles and the many sufferings of the past. •

Rosa Luxemburg (1871-1919) was a Marxist theorist, philosopher, economist and revolutionary socialist of Polish-Jewish descent who became a naturalized German citizen. She was a founding member of the Communist Party of Germany (1919).



# The Workers' International Festival (1899)

## Clara Zetkin

Wherever busy folk are drudging under the yoke of capitalism, the organised working men and women will demonstrate on May Day for the idea of their social emancipation.

Certainly May demonstration was decided at the International Congress at Paris in order to maintain energetically the revindication of the eight hours' day, and the protective legislation of labour in general. But the character of the Congress, the discussions preceding the decision, undoubtedly affirm that the reforms claimed are not the final aims of the labour movement, but only means to serve those aims. They are food on the way for the revolutionary working-class, marching to conquer political power, and by means of it both economical and social liberty: they are not less than that, yet they are nothing more. Important as they are – necessary conditions for the powerful development of the labour movement – the working-class never will sell for the dish of lentils of reforms its primogenital right to the social revolution. For reforms ameliorate the situation of the working class, they lighten the weight of the chains labour is burdened with by capitalism, but they are not sufficient to crush capitalism and to emancipate the workers from their tyranny.

Therefore the workers' May Day is not only a demonstration in favour of all social reforms, demanded by the conscious part of the proletariat, but it is in the same time and must inevitably be, a demonstration for the noble aims of the proletarian class struggle, the abolition capitalist society, the abolition of every kind of slavery of man by man. In spite of its peaceable form, May demonstration, by its very essence, is, and remains in consequence a revolutionary action. It is and remains revolutionary, not in the sense that policemen and politicians understand the word, but in its true historical significance, for it is the conscious expression of the working people's will, to strive for a radical transformation of society and to obtain by its very own efforts all the reforms that will enable the wage-slaves to substitute Socialism for capitalism. The emancipation of the working-class is a historical necessity, and it can only be the work of the proletariat itself. This conviction is the keynote of all the May manifestations.

By the May demonstration the working- class declares that it has done for ever with the legend that true liberty, nay even an effective amelioration

of the most cruel evils and sufferings capitalist exploitation is bringing over the workers, would be granted by the benevolence and justice of the upper classes. Only the action of the working people themselves, organised in trade unions and organised in a class party for the political struggle, will in the present enforce on bourgeois society the necessary reforms and will one day change wage-slaves into free citizens of a free commonwealth. Only a working class, strong in health, in intellectual and moral power, can perform its historical task. Each reform, therefore, improving the economical and political situation of the workers proves to be an arm that increases the energy with which the proletarian struggle of classes is fought. This May demonstration does not ring the bells of a paltry peace between labour and capitalism, it is, on the contrary, a pronunciamento of the working class against capitalist society. The slaves of our days have numbered themselves and they will no longer be slaves. By the May demonstration they show that they have recognised clearly their own true interests, that are in irreconcilable antagonism with the capitalist interests.

These interests of the workers, as the exploited and oppressed, class of society, are the same in all countries. In consequence May demonstration must be an international one. Across the frontiers and seas the workers of all nations reach out to each other the hands for a brotherly union; against the international reactionary power of capitalism rises the international revolutionary power of the working class. The fact, that in the whole capitalist world the workers stand up jointly to affirm the solidarity of their class interests by asking the same reforms, by endeavouring for the same aims, is of the highest interest. For the future historian the proletarian May demonstration will be more interesting and important than a dozen of those barbarous battles now exulted in by the Jingoes of every country. It is an evident proof of the moral and intellectual revival of the working class. It shows that the capitalist exploitation unites the workers without difference of trade, sex, religion, and nationality, into the one revolutionary army, that is going to conquer a new world, where labour has all to win and nothing to lose but its chains. Thus we hail May demonstration as a herald of future struggles, but also of future victories, which must as surely cone as spring follows winter; morn, night. •

Clara Zetkin (1857 – 1933) was a German Marxist theorist, activist, and advocate for women's rights. In 1911, she organized the first International Women's Day. She was a member of the Communist Party of Germany (KPD), which she represented in the Reichstag during the Weimar Republic from 1920 to 1933.

# The Brief Origins of May Day

## Eric Chase

Most people living in the United States know little about the International Workers' Day of May Day. For many others there is an assumption that it is a holiday celebrated in state communist countries like Cuba or the former Soviet Union. Most Americans don't realize that May Day has its origins here in this country and is as 'American' as baseball and apple pie, and stemmed from the pre-Christian holiday of Beltane, a celebration of rebirth and fertility.

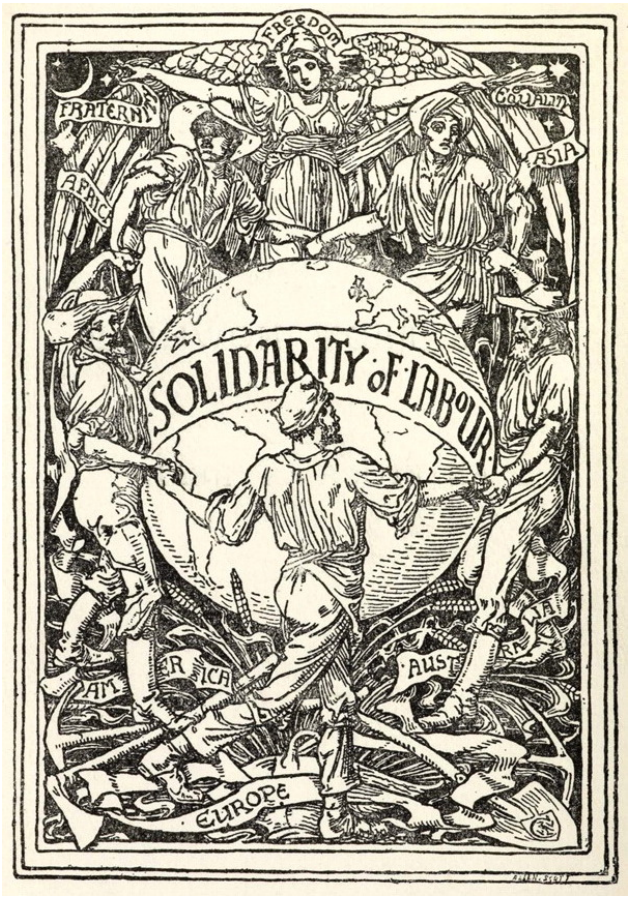
In the late nineteenth century, the working class was in constant struggle to gain the 8-hour work day. Working conditions were severe and it was quite common to work 10 to 16 hour days in unsafe conditions. Death and injury were commonplace at many work places and inspired such books as Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* and Jack London's *The Iron Heel*. As early as the 1860s, working people agitated to shorten the workday without a cut in pay, but it wasn't until the late 1880s that organized labour was able to garner enough strength to declare the 8-hour workday. This proclamation was without consent of employers, yet demanded by many of the working class.

At this time, socialism was a new and attractive idea to working people, many of whom were drawn to its ideology of working class control over the production and distribution of all goods and services. Workers had seen first-hand that Capitalism benefited only their bosses, trading workers' lives for profit. Thousands of men, women and children were dying needlessly every year in the workplace, with life expectancy as low as their early twenties in some industries, and little hope but death of rising out of their destitution. Socialism offered another option.

A variety of socialist organizations sprung up throughout the later half of the 19th century, ranging from political parties to choir groups. In fact, many socialists were elected into governmental office by their constituency. But again, many of these socialists were ham-strung by the political process which was so evidently controlled by big business and the bi-partisan political machine. Tens of thousands of socialists broke ranks from their parties, rebuffed the entire political process, which was seen as nothing more than protection for the wealthy, and created anarchist groups throughout the country. Literally thousands of working people embraced the ideals of anarchism, which sought to put an end to all hierarchical structures (including government), emphasized worker controlled industry, and valued direct action over the bureaucratic

political process. It is inaccurate to say that labour unions were taken over by anarchists and socialists, but rather anarchists and socialist made up the labour unions.

At its national convention in Chicago, held in 1884, the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions (which later became the American Federation of Labor), proclaimed that "eight hours shall constitute a legal day's labour from and after May 1, 1886." The following year, the FOTLU, backed by many Knights of Labor locals, reiterated their proclamation stating that it would be supported by strikes and demonstrations. At first, most radicals and anarchists regarded this demand as too reformist, failing to strike "at the root of the evil." A year before the Haymarket Massacre, Samuel Fielden pointed out in the anarchist newspaper, *The Alarm*, that whether a man works eight hours a day or ten hours a day, he is still a slave.



Despite the misgivings of many of the anarchists, an estimated quarter million workers in the Chicago area became directly involved in the crusade to implement the eight hour work day, including the Trades and Labor Assembly, the Socialistic Labor Party and local Knights of Labor. As more and more of the workforce mobilized against the employers, these radicals conceded to fight for the 8-hour day, realizing that "the tide of opinion and determination of most wage-workers was set in this direction." With the involvement of the anarchists, there seemed to be an infusion of greater issues than the 8-hour day. There grew a sense of a greater social revolution beyond the more immediate gains of shortened hours, but a drastic change in the economic structure of capitalism.

In a proclamation printed just before May 1, 1886, one publisher appealed to working people with this plea:

- Workingmen to Arms!
- War to the Palace, Peace to the Cottage, and Death to LUXURIOUS IDLENESS.
- The wage system is the only cause of the World's misery. It is supported by the rich classes, and to destroy it, they must be either made to work or DIE.
- One pound of DYNAMITE is better than a bushel of BALLOTS!
- MAKE YOUR DEMAND FOR EIGHT HOURS with weapons in your hands to meet the capitalistic bloodhounds, police, and militia in proper manner.

Not surprisingly the entire city was prepared for mass bloodshed, reminiscent of the railroad strike a decade earlier when police and soldiers gunned down hundreds of striking workers. On May 1, 1886, more than 300,000 workers in 13,000 businesses across the United States walked off their jobs in the first May Day celebration in history. In Chicago, the epicenter for the 8-hour day agitators, 40,000 went out on strike with the anarchists in the forefront of the public's eye. With their fiery speeches and revolutionary ideology of direct action, anarchists and anarchism became respected and embraced by the working people and despised by the capitalists.

The names of many – Albert Parsons, Johann Most, August Spies and Louis Lingg – became household words in Chicago and throughout the country. Parades, bands and tens of thousands of demonstrators in the streets exemplified the workers' strength and unity, yet didn't become violent as the newspapers and authorities predicted.

More and more workers continued to walk off their jobs until the numbers swelled to nearly 100,000, yet peace prevailed. It was not until two days

later, May 3, 1886, that violence broke out at the McCormick Reaper Works between police and strikers.

For six months, armed Pinkerton agents and the police harassed and beat locked-out steelworkers as they picketed. Most of these workers belonged to the 'anarchist-dominated' Metal Workers' Union. During a speech near the McCormick plant, some two hundred demonstrators joined the steelworkers on the picket line. Beatings with police clubs escalated into rock throwing by the strikers which the police responded to with gunfire. At least two strikers were killed and an unknown number were wounded.

Full of rage, a public meeting was called by some of the anarchists for the following day in Haymarket Square to discuss the police brutality. Due to bad weather and short notice, only about 3000 of the tens of thousands of people showed up from the day before. This affair included families with children and the mayor of Chicago himself. Later, the mayor would testify that the crowd remained calm and orderly and that speaker August Spies "made no suggestion... for immediate use of force or violence toward any person..."

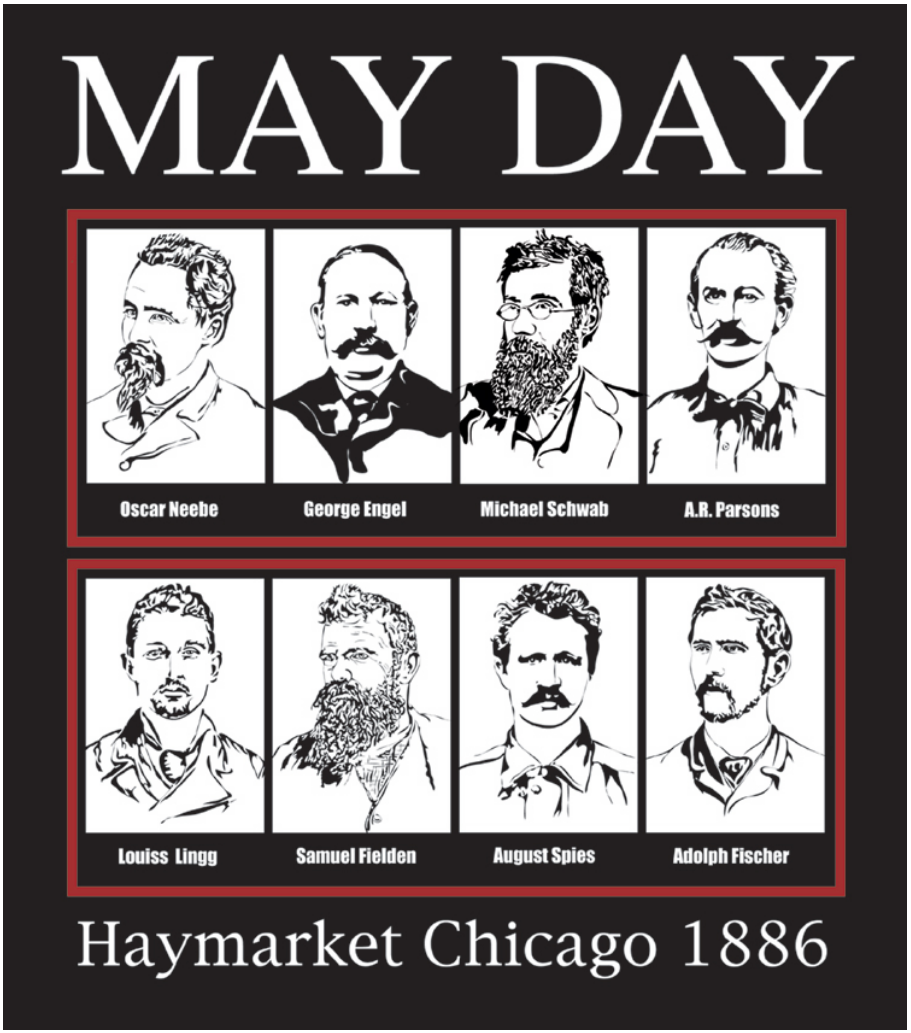
As the speech wound down, two detectives rushed to the main body of police, reporting that a speaker was using inflammatory language, inciting the police to march on the speakers' wagon. As the police began to disperse the already thinning crowd, a bomb was thrown into the police ranks. No one knows who threw the bomb, but speculations varied from blaming any one of the anarchists, to an agent provocateur working for the police.

Enraged, the police fired into the crowd. The exact number of civilians killed or wounded was never determined, but an estimated seven or eight civilians died, and up to forty were wounded. One officer died immediately and another seven died in the following weeks. Later evidence indicated that only one of the police deaths could be attributed to the bomb and that all the other police fatalities had or could have had been due to their own indiscriminate gun fire. Aside from the bomb thrower, who was never identified, it was the police, not the anarchists, who perpetrated the violence.

Eight anarchists – Albert Parsons, August Spies, Samuel Fielden, Oscar Neebe, Michael Schwab, George Engel, Adolph Fischer and Louis Lingg – were arrested and convicted of murder, though only three were even present at Haymarket and those three were in full view of all when the bombing occurred. The jury in their trial was comprised of business leaders in a gross mockery of justice similar to the Sacco-Vanzetti case thirty years later, or the trials of AIM and Black Panther members in the

seventies. The entire world watched as these eight organizers were convicted, not for their actions, of which all of were innocent, but for their political and social beliefs. On November 11, 1887, after many failed appeals, Parsons, Spies, Engel and Fisher were hung to death. Louis Lingg, in his final protest of the state's claim of authority and punishment, took his own life the night before with an explosive device in his mouth.

The remaining organizers, Fielden, Neebe and Schwab, were pardoned six years later by Governor Altgeld, who publicly lambasted the judge on a travesty of justice. Immediately after the Haymarket Massacre, big business and government conducted what some say was the very first 'Red



Scare' in this country. Spun by mainstream media, anarchism became synonymous with bomb throwing and socialism became un-American. The common image of an anarchist became a bearded, eastern European immigrant with a bomb in one hand and a dagger in the other.

Today we see tens of thousands of activists embracing the ideals of the Haymarket Martyrs and those who established May Day as an International Workers' Day. Ironically, May Day is an official holiday in 66 countries and unofficially celebrated in many more, but rarely is it recognized in this country where it began.

Over one hundred years have passed since that first May Day. In the earlier part of the 20th century, the U.S. government tried to curb the celebration and further wipe it from the public's memory by establishing "Law and Order Day" on May 1. We can draw many parallels between the events of 1886 and today. We still have locked out steelworkers struggling for justice. We still have voices of freedom behind bars as in the cases of Mumia Abu Jamal and Leonard Peltier. We still had the ability to mobilize tens of thousands of people in the streets of a major city to proclaim "THIS IS WHAT DEMOCRACY LOOKS LIKE!" at the WTO and FTAA demonstrations.

Words stronger than any I could write are engraved on the Haymarket Monument:

THE DAY WILL COME
WHEN OUR SILENCE WILL BE MORE POWERFUL
THAN THE VOICES YOU ARE THROTTLING TODAY.

Truly, history has a lot to teach us about the roots of our radicalism. When we remember that people were shot so we could have the 8-hour day; if we acknowledge that homes with families in them were burned to the ground so we could have Saturday as part of the weekend; when we recall 8-year old victims of industrial accidents who marched in the streets protesting working conditions and child labour only to be beat down by the police and company thugs, we understand that our current condition cannot be taken for granted – people fought for the rights and dignities we enjoy today, and there is still a lot more to fight for. The sacrifices of so many people can not be forgotten or we'll end up fighting for those same gains all over again. This is why we celebrate May Day. •

This was published on the IWW website:
www.iww.org/history/library/misc/origins_of_mayday

# Women and Trade Unions

## Sheila Rowbotham

After sections of the working class got the vote in 1867 there was pressure to remove the legal restraints on the trade unions: in the first half of the 1870s there was an expansion in trade-union membership along with the trade boom. This took the form not only of the increasing strength of existing unions, but also of the growth of unions in new areas like agriculture, and among unskilled workers... In 1872-74 as in the period 1833-34 there were attempts to recruit women. In 1872 the Edinburgh Upholsterers Sewers Society was established, an au-women union which survived for some considerable time. In 1874 Emma Paterson, daughter of a school teacher and married to a cabinet maker, formed both the Women's Protective and Provident League to encourage trade unionism among women, and the National Union of Working Women in Bristol. She had got the idea of women's unions from the Female Umbrella Makers Unions in the United States. She was opposed to mixed unions Eke those in the cotton industry because "the women paid only half contributions and were excluded from management."

When in 1874 a strike of unorganised woollen weavers broke out in Dewsbury against a cut in wages, the League moved in and the women won. In the following year several small unions among London women bookbinders, upholsterers, shirt and collar makers and dressmakers were formed. In 1876 Mrs Paterson and Mrs Simcox, from the London Society of Bookbinders, Upholsterers and Shirt and Collar Makers, took their place in the TUC. At first they were welcomed but conflict soon broke out. The League got its funds from "middle-class friends", the male trade unionists were suspicious of the influence of middle-class women. Men like Broadhurst, who was a prominent trade-union leader, were dubious about women organising in unions. He said it was "very natural for ladies to be impatient of restraint at any time," therefore the factory was an unsuitable place for them. "Wives should be in their proper place at home."

By this time trade was depressed and unemployment increasing. The men tended to see protection as a means of eliminating competition. Mrs Paterson opposed the Factory and Workshops Act of 1877 because she feared it would place women at a disadvantage. She explained she was not for long hours, but until women got better pay any reduction in hours made their wages even lower. There were similar disputes in the 1880s. Later Mrs Paterson healed the breach somewhat by urging higher pay for women so they could not be used as cheap labour.

In the second half of the 1880s, and in the 1890s, workers who had been outside craft organisation started to enter the trade-union movement. They brought with them a new consciousness and a wider area of trade unionism. They affected the older societies" structure, and the attitude to the women's unions and participation in trades councils improved.

The action of working-class women at work also forced trade unionists to take their predicament and determination seriously. From 1888 to around 1892 there was a considerable amount of spontaneous industrial action not only by men but also by women who had never organised before. The matchgirls" strike is the best known because of the publicity the socialist Annie Besant gave it in papers and journals. However *Commonweal*, the paper of the Socialist League, reported several other incidents of female militancy in the same year. Blanket weavers in Heckmondwike, female cigarmakers in Nottingham, girls in a tin box manufactory in London, who pelted men who continued to work after they came out with red-ochre and flour, cotton workers, and jute workers in Dundee, took action spontaneously in 1888. The reasons for striking varied, from demands for increases to resistance to cuts, or opposition to fines. Again in 1889 mill girls in Kilmarnock came out over the bad quality of yam they were being given. At Alverthorpe, near Wakefield, woollen weavers, women and girls, rejected a reduced rate and marched in procession headed by girls with concertinas. This was broken up by the police, and the girls with concertinas-obviously regarded as "leaders" – were fined for obstruction. Even waiters and waitresses demonstrated at Hyde Park in October 1889-though unfortunately they saw foreign. workers not their employers as their foes.

The socialist groups were often involved in these strikes, although radicals, liberals and Christians were also sometimes to be found helping women workers because of the moral outcry against sweated labour.

The Socialist League for instance, was helping cap-makers in Manchester form a union in August 1889, and an urgent appeal for help came from Bristol comrades for money for cotton workers on strike in November 1889.

In 1891 there was a long and desperate strike at Manningham mills in Bradford. Isabella Ford supported the mill girls because her parents had started one of the first evening schools for working-class girls and she had grown up knowing the conditions in the mills. Although initially very afraid of speaking, she defended the girls on the platform and demonstrated in the streets with them. Isabella and her sister Bessie lived at Adel near Leeds and their house was a kind of informal centre where socialists, trade unionists and radicals would meet. Among the

Leeds socialists was Tom Maguire, who organised the unskilled gas workers" strike and helped with the tailoring union. He was a poet as well as a political organiser and wrote some verses to women in the tailoring trade called "Machine-Room Chants." In one called "The Duchess of Number Three", he was ironic about a very beautiful, proud girl who said she did not need to join the union as she was all right on her own.

In London too women workers were helped by the new unionists and by socialists. Laundresses tried to make a union. They were supported by 27 trades councils and held a joint demonstration with railway workers in July 1891 in Hyde Park. According to the records of the Women's Trade Union League this was the first demonstration of working women in the Park-presumably the waitresses were not counted. Evidently several thousand laundresses and other workers turned out, and there were three platforms with Miss Abrahams from the Women's Trade Union League on one, and Tom Mann and Clem Edwards, a docker, on the other two.

More male trade unionists were beginning to see the need to work with the women and sensing the wider implications of female industrial militancy. For example a representative of the Amalgamated Society of Tailors wished the Women's Union "God Speed" at the annual meeting of the League in 1892. It was his "opinion ... that the women should be allowed to work out their own political and social questions for themselves just the same as men are doing now."

The publicity the strikes received was partly stimulated by middleclass guilt, but it also encouraged women to report and investigate the conditions of working class women's work. Beatrice Potter (later Webb) wrote *Pages from a Work Girl's Diary* in 1888 about East End tailoring. Annie Besant wrote up the conditions of the match girls in her paper *The Link*. Clementina Black exposed the conditions of home work as well as helping women to organise in Glasgow. Middle-class women thus learned about the situation of working-class women and came to see them not as passive objects of pity but as people who had to organise. in many cases this experience radicalised the middle-class observers.

"Unless you have lived among oppression and injustice," wrote Isabella Ford, "it is most difficult to realise how full of it is our industrial system particularly when it touches women."

There are many questions about the relationship of middle-class women to the trade-union organisation of the working class which remain completely unstudied. It is not clear whether they simply imposed their own concerns for the unfortunate upon working class women, or whether they broke with "rescue" work. Although this is partly a political question-

the socialists were less likely to see trade unions in theoretical terms as an extension of "rescue" than were the liberals-it is also a more complex question of personal class response. The same problem of course existed for the middle-class male radical and socialist.

It is certain however that there was some interconnection between the feminist movement and women involved with the organization and conditions of working-class women. Also there was evidently an awareness in the 1890s among working class women of the wider implications of militancy. Margaret McMillan, a member of the ILP, writes in her biography of her sister Rachel, that although women were never equal in the trade union, within the labour movement:

> "A new feature ... was the stir and murmur among women. Overworked mothers and wives, young girls too and older women who were unmarried, and living by their own labour, at factory or workshop, wakened as from sleep and began to conceive new hope and purpose."

It is very difficult to know how extensive this feeling was or what it involved in terms of organization. We know very little about what working-class women discussed amongst themselves because they have only been considered worthy of history in exceptional instances. Thus it is not clear whether they were questioning their position as women, or demanding new rights like the vote. The responses of men are a little more accessible. Predictably there was both suspicion and enthusiasm among the leaders in the labour movement.

The TUC had been committed to adult suffrage as long as it had been in existence, and to votes for women since 1884, but in a pious rather than an active manner. Real doubts about giving the vote to women on the existing property terms, which weighed in favour of the middle class, mingled with a straightforward feeling that women should stay in their

place and let men decide on politics. The fear of women becoming active went beyond the vote. A member of the Women's Co-operative Guild, which was formed by Mrs Acland toward the end of the nineteenth century, remembered her husband's suspicions many years later. "Sometimes my husband rather resented the teachings of the Guild.... The Guild he said was making women think too much of themselves."

There was at least some awareness of the connection between women's oppression at work and in the home among the "new" unionists. Tom Mann, one of the leaders of the new unionism, wrote:

> "Who would choose to be a workman's wife, with its washing every week, bed-making every day, meal-preparing every few hours, and for a change, to be up early on a bank holiday, wash and dress, and carry a number of youngsters to the station, look after them for a dozen hours, get jammed in half a dozen crowds, reach home ready to faint-lucky if no limbs are broken-and get up next day for the usual round?" [Tom Mann]

He proposed that women should organise co-operative child care, shopping, cooking, eating, washing, and use gas instead of coal. There should be music and dancing for the children. He was careful to emphasise that the women should remain "virtuous." Co-operative housework did not imply "free love" or "mormonism."

## Socialism, the Family and Sexuality

Behind middle-class anxiety lay not only pity for the weak but also fear of the strength of the working class and apprehension about the consequences of the new socialist groups which were breaking with the assumptions of liberalism. Out of this socialism came discussion of hitherto submerged questions. Like the utopian socialists earlier, revolutionaries in the 1880s and 1890s tried to connect sexual subordination to property ownership, and to discover the relationship between the oppression of women and the exploitation of workers.

The direct influence of Marx was not very great in England before the early twentieth century. Although his general ideas spread through works of popularization, most of his early writings were only published later this century. In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1843-4* he had followed through Fourier's ideas about the position of women being an index of social development. The relation of man to woman was part of the whole relationship of human beings to the external natural world. "The relationship of man to woman is the most natural relation of human being

to human being. It indicates therefore how far man's natural behaviour has become human." [Marx, 1844]

Shortly after, in *The German Ideology*, he described the division of labour between men and women in the family, and in the sexual act and the relationship of productive forces to human consciousness. The family was part of the productive forces. "The production of life, both of one's own in labour and of fresh life in procreation, now appears as a double relationship: on the one hand as a natural, on the other as a social relationship." [Marx, *German Ideology*]

The private ownership of property affected all social relations including those between men and women. The worker's sale of labour power as a commodity was thus connected to the woman's sale of her body. "Prostitution is only a specific expression of the universal prostitution of the worker." [Marx, 1844 Mss]

In order to understand this connection historically both Marx and Engels studied pre-capitalist societies. At first Marx believed that the family was the original social relationship, and that the tribe followed. But he changed his mind later and came to the conclusion that the various forms of the family came out of the "... first incipient loosening of the tribal bonds." [Engels footnote in Capital] He believed he could see the same process within capitalist society, as the pre-industrial family disintegrated. Out of this disintegration came a new synthesis, the basis for relations between men and women, parents and children which were not distorted by property and ownership.

> "However terrible and disgusting the dissolution, under the capitalist system, of the old family ties may appear, nevertheless, modem industry, by assigning as it does an important part in the process of production outside the domestic sphere to women, to young persons and to children of both sexes, creates a new economical foundation for a higher form of the family, and of the relations between the sexes." [*Capital, Volume 1*, Marx]

Then he jumped into the future to say it was obvious that the "collective working group" of people "of both sexes and all ages" must, "under suitable conditions," become a source of "humane development," though its capitalist form was "brutal," and the "labourer exists for the process of production, and not the process of production for the labourer."

However, this left the intervening period vague and mysterious. While capitalism continued, the collective working group meant the

subordination of men, women and children to the expansion of capital. Nor did Marx take into account the consequences of the intervention of the state in the reproduction of labour power. He apparently presumed that the capitalist mode of production would completely erode au former kinds of property and production.

In fact their relationship proved more complex. Certain aspects of patriarchy continued to serve capital, by maintaining female subordination in the family and the state. The idea of the woman's body being the property of the man continued in cultural and sexual life even while the economic control of men over women's persons in the working class disintegrated, It had a useful economic function. Marx had observed how women were used as part of the reserve army of labour; they could be reabsorbed in the family when labour was plentiful and there they played their part in the reproduction of labour power.

Marx saw communal domestic economy as presupposing the development of machinery and the use of natural forces, but, like Engels, he never envisaged the consequences of contraception. Capitalism was to create a technology which made control over production and over procreation technically but not socially possible. The family was streamlined but patriarchy did not disintegrate completely. The erosion of man's property in women, and of the ideology of man's superiority over women, occurred more slowly, too, than Marx imagined. The precise relationship between the continuation of patriarchal authority and the class system in capitalism was left unclear along with the more general problem of the connection between material and ideological structures.

In 1884 Engels' *Origin of the Family Private Property and the State* was published. This was an attempt to analyse the oppression of women in terms of the relationship between the mode of production and procreation and the connection between forms of the family and systems of property ownership. He stated his intention in the preface.

> "According to the materialist conception the determining factor in history is, in the final instance, the production and reproduction of the immediate essentials of life. This again is of a two-fold character. On the one side, the production of the means of existence, articles of food and clothing, dwellings and of the tools necessary for that production; on the other side, the production of human beings themselves, the propagation of the species. The social organization under which the people of a particular historical epoch and a particular community live is

> determined by both kinds of production, by the stage of development of labour on the one hand and of the family on the other." [Engels, Preface to *Origin of the Family*]

The idea of production in the family being a factor in historical development was subsequently obscured in marxist thinking. But even in *The Origin of the Family* the specific form of the influence of "the production of human beings" upon "the production of the means of existence" is left unclear. Also human production is separated from human sensuous experience and feeling. Engels has here substituted a narrow conception of economic relations for a wider definition of material existence.

Nonetheless his argument is worth looking at in some detail. He saw the monogamous family as the result of the private ownership of property. The family was a microcosm of the contradictions and oppositions in society as a whole. Monogamy had meant the subordination of women. Men had appropriated individual women as property. Monogamy was based on the "supremacy of the man", its "purpose being to produce children of undisputed paternity."[*ibid*] who could inherit his property. The division of labour in the family regulated the division of property. Engels believed monogamy and private property were preceded by a period of primitive communism, in which this appropriation of women did not exist. Monogamy thus meant at one and the same time a great historical set-back for women, but also the necessary basis for a transformation of sexual relations. He thus saw monogamy as the equivalent of capitalism, and sex as the equivalent of class. The "first class opposition that occurs in history coincides with the development of antagonism between man and woman in monogamous marriage." [*ibid*]

He generalised the experience of middle-class women. Housework became a "Private service, the wife a "head servant." [*ibid*] In fact of course not all women were excluded from production. Engels believed that modern industry opened the possibility of ending the "domestic slavery of the wife." It absorbed

women back into social production, and he thought it would make private domestic labour public. As it turned out capitalism did not need to make household labour public: instead women had to work both outside and at home. The reduction of family size made the continuation of the individual nucleus of the family possible while married women were absorbed into the labour force.

Engels saw individual sex love as a historical creation connected to monogamy. He believed that like monogamy and capitalism it was to be transcended. While reticent about making prophecies for the future he, like Marx, envisaged sexual relations in which economic dependence played no part. Capitalism had distorted the ways in which individuals experienced sexual love. Prostitution was the other side of monogamy, love was confused with possession, morality was bound by external codes, and not by the relationship between people. The evils of capitalist society were covered by the "cloak of love and charity, to palliate them or to deny them." [*ibid*] But in subsequent revolutionary movements it was to prove very hard to decide what elements in bourgeois romantic love should survive in socialism, and what aspects of sensuous individualism were antagonistic to the creation of communism.

Engels raised many questions which are still very relevant, though his analogy of female oppression with class exploitation does not really work. The notion of women as a class, as the proletarians in marriage, with the men as the bourgeois, means that only the economic aspects of woman's relations to man is discussed. The sexual difference between men and women is obscured by reducing the whole relationship to one of woman's capacity to work. This ignores that sexual relations are part of a whole human relationship to the external world, though in different communities these assume a variety of institutional and social forms. Moreover the family has a complicated connection to production and ownership of property. It does not always change neatly as they are transformed. Nor is sex the equivalent of class. Individuals in the past have been able to move from one class to the other. But women, except in very modern exceptional instances, cannot become men, any more than black people can become white. Also the victory of the proletariat means the abolition of class. The proletariat has no need for the capitalist. But the end of the subjection of women does not thus mean the abolition of men. The analogy of sex and class is confusing.

There are also problems about the type of anthropological material that was available to Engels when he and Marx studied these questions. He used the work of an anthropologist called Morgan, who was part of the evolutionary school. Evolutionary anthropologists were concerned with tracing back the origins of human society: there was much debate about

the earliest forms of property and sexuality, and whether there had been a universal early stage of promiscuity and communal ownership. The belief that primitive communism might have existed, suggested that capitalism and monogamy also might be superseded, and shocked conservatives. Engels felt that Morgan's work related to his own and to Marx's study of capitalism.

However, because they were talking about a pre-historical period there was very little evidence, except for myths and existing primitive societies. It is very doubtful whether myths are literal descriptions of actual societies or historical happenings. They have been seen as the attempt to know a reality that remains hidden, as a means of bolstering the claims of one group against another, to express concealed fears of one group against another. The assumption that the existence of myths about an age in which women were not subordinate proves that such an era actually existed is thus almost certainly an oversimplification." Also there is no necessary connection between a system of inheritance which passes through the woman in the family (matrilineal) and the political, social and economic dominance of women (matriarchy). The main difficulty though about the evolutionists" assumption that there was a universal stage of society which preceded private ownership, is that they were forced to use *existing* primitive societies as evidence. They regarded the development of human society as a kind of biological childhood in which the "children" always grew up in the same way. Yet one cannot with any certainty recreate the earliest societies from abstractions about existing ones. It would seem that the idea of a single universal stage must remain an hypothesis which can never be proved either way.

Nonetheless Engels's attempt to synthesise existing anthropology with marxism stimulated other revolutionary socialists in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century to study this whole area. When the evolutionary method was attacked by subsequent anthropologists they neglected to ask the kind of questions Engels had felt were important about the ownership of the means of production and the position of women in society. Since the 1920s Marxists, too, have neglected the role of the family in historical development, and have contented themselves with a defensive return to Engels's system of categorization. Only recently has a marxist anthropology conscious of the oppression of women begun to emerge.

Some of these more general questions were taken up by others in the socialist movement in Britain in the late nineteenth century. Eleanor Marx, Marx's daughter, with Edward Aveling, reviewed Bebel's book *Women in the Past, Present and Future* in the *Westminster Review* in 1885, in an article "The Woman Question from a Socialist Point of View." They

were very sympathetic to Bebel's study and also referred to Engels's work. They were aware of contemporary feminist agitation for higher education, the vote, and against the forced inspection of prostitutes. They believed these reforms were important but did not strike at the structure of female oppression, which they believed, like Engels, was of an economic origin.

> "Women are the creatures of an organised tyranny of men, as the workers are the creatures of an organised tyranny of idlers ... no solution of the difficulties and problems that present themselves is really possible in the present condition of society." [Eleanor Marx in *Westminster Review*]

They used the idea of women being the equivalent of the proletariat, and returned to the early radicals" insistence that women could not be freed by men. Women, like workers, had to recognise "that their emancipation will come from themselves." They would find allies among men, just as the workers found allies among the philosophers, artists and poets, but they had nothing more to hope from men as a whole, than the workers had from the middle class. Eleanor was very interested in Shelley and Ibsen and it is possible that her belief that marriage and morality were based on the economic organization of society, her support for easier divorce, and her feeling that the "sex instinct" was repressed in modem society, came from them as well as from her own relations with Aveling.

Edward Carpenter's *Love's Coming of Age* appeared about ten years later, in 1896. This was a collection of pamphlets originally published by the Manchester Labour Press, which had sold well in socialist and "forward" circles. The willingness of the Labour Press to publish pamphlets on "Sex Love" and "Women" in the 1890s is itself an indication of the connection between Northern socialism and interest in sexual and psychological matters. Carpenter was an ex-clergyman who became a university extension lecturer in the North and then became involved in the socialist movement and developed an interest in Indian mysticism. Carpenter's whole life was a personal attempt to bridge the separation of man from nature, as well as the class and sex divide. He lived on a small farm near Sheffield in great simplicity and gave his private income to socialist causes. He was friendly with Havelock Ellis, an early sex psychologist.

In *Love's Coming of Age* he tried to connect existing anthropology and psychology to a vague rather mystical marxism. Like Engels he saw the family changing with different forms of society. He was enthusiastic about the contemporary feminist movement and not only supported the liberation of women, but questioned whether sexual differences were as fixed as people imagined. Homosexuality was even more taboo in the 1890s than discussion of heterosexuality. Carpenter published a pamphlet

called “Homogenic Love” through the Labour Press. Fisher Unwin panicked and turned down *Love’s Coming of Age* at the last minute because Oscar Wilde had been convicted. So the courageous Labour Press brought the first edition out. In 1906 he added a chapter called “The Intermediate Sex” in which he described the suffering of young people of “the intermediate sex” whom he called “Urnings.” Because “a veil of complete silence” was “drawn over the subject” they faced “the most painful misunderstanding and perversions and confusions of mind.”

Carpenter did not exactly “come out” but his own homosexuality was not concealed from his socialist friends, including his working-class comrades in the Sheffield Socialist Society and in the Lancashire and Yorkshire movement. Carpenter belonged to a circle of intellectuals who broke very determinedly if self-consciously from their own class and sex supremacy. His attempt to think through the problem of sexual liberation was, however, restricted by the lack of any effective system of contraception. In 1909 he added the notes on Preventive Checks to Population. He believed women should not be a “mere machine for perpetual reproduction.” However he said:

> “artificial preventatives ... are for the most part very unsatisfactory, their uncertainty, their desperate matter-of-factness, so fatal to real feeling, the probability that they are in one way or another dangerous or harmful, and then their one-sidedness, since here-as so often in matters of sex ... the man's satisfaction (is) at the expense of the woman.”

Despite the inadequacy of contraception he grasped the significance of non-procreative sex. When sexual pleasure was separated from conception, and when propagation was within human control, a new realm of freedom became possible. He did not think though in terms of improving contraceptives. Instead he introduced into the English socialist movement the idea of “prolonged bodily conjunction” without male orgasm. These ideas came from the theories of an American, J H Noyes, who had advocated free love and communal living based on male continence. It is possible too that Carpenter was influenced here by his study of Indian culture.

There was in the 1890s and early 1900s a good deal of discussion about sexuality, family, alternative ways of living, and an attempt to try and live something of the socialist society of the future in the here and now. This awareness of the connection between beliefs and practice did not only exist among middle-class people, who, like Carpenter, went off to live in cottages in the country and shared housework equally. Carpenter's

influence was important in the North-many working-class socialists broke with Mrs Grundy along with liberalism. In East London anarchists like Rudolf Rocker and his wife defied existing conventions by living in a free union. In *Pioneering Days* Thomas Bell, later to become a communist, describes how class consciousness, the theory he learned in the Glasgow marxist economics study groups, and the attempt to live with his wife and children without giving in to the old world, came together in his political development.

Some marxists and socialists however were opposed to Engels's and Carpenter's books. H M Hyndman, the autocratic and sectarian leader of the marxist Social Democratic Federation, not only disliked Engels personally but regarded *The Origin of the Family* as "a colossal piece of impudence ... to garble Morgan's grand work." The young rebels in the group, soon to split, got copies of Engels's book from America along with works by the industrial unionist Daniel de Leon.

Engels argued generally against the SDF leaders who, he said, saw Marxism as an orthodoxy that had "to be forced down the throats of the workers" and swallowed whole. Any participation in everyday union struggles was dismissed. Socialism was seen as being produced by a crisis, an objective process in which the consciousness and activity of men and women played a negligible part. They saw socialist "education" as being not a learning through doing, organising and discussion in action, but as something which was brought from outside as received truth. This sectarianism reduced their effectiveness. It also meant that they displayed the same intolerance to the feminist agitation as they did to trade-union militancy.

There was also opposition later from the non-marxist socialists. They were afraid discussion of the family and sexuality would give socialism a bad name and put people off. Robert Blatchford editor of *The Clarion*, a socialist newspaper, wrote to Carpenter after *Love's Coming of Age* was published, saying he was sure Carpenter realised the economic changes had to come first and wouldn't it be better to keep quiet about sex until after they had got socialism and change things then.

In fact the sacredness of the family was part of Blatchford's socialism. He believed in the rule of the "efficient," the recreation of the Empire, and "reverence for women." He loved "the common people," "the women," and "England." Women were "civilisers," "angels." "It is when we need women that we learn their value. It is when we trust ourselves fearlessly to her protecting arms that we find the goodliness and loveliness of Mother England." Blatchford's idealization of the woman as mother meant, not surprisingly, that he was wary of Carpenter's socialism.

In *Britain for the British* in 1902 he wrote, "Socialists, it has been said, want to destroy home life, to abolish marriage, to take the children from their parents, and to establish "Free Love." Blatchford reassured everyone that free love was no more to do with socialists than it was with tories or liberals and he would never let his children be taken off by the state. Far from seeing the family as changing in different societies, he saw it historically and morally as the basis of the nation. "I believe that the nation should be a family." The nation "family" had to be made safe, and protected against foreign competition. The "family" had to be made healthy so the workers could control the Empire.

Blatchford was a skilled propagandist and his ideas appealed to many of the existing attitudes in the working class. He was one of the "non-ideological", "practical", "commonsense" socialists who believe in gradual reform and are convenient scarecrows decked out in the left-over rags of ruling class ideology and values. Other socialists, like Bruce Glasier in *The Meaning of Socialism* in 1919, waxed sentimental about the family. In its existing form in capitalism it was evidently "... a small socialist community" which should be extended into the nation as a whole.

Thus while the Hyndman type of revolutionary socialist dismissed the family and sexuality as being irrelevant to marxism, the reformists saw the family as a moral absolute not as a changing social relationship, and idealised women as angels and mothers. Both these attitudes have had a curious longevity. •

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www.marxists.org/subject/women/authors/rowbotham-sheila

# What you need to know about May Day

## Leo Panitch

For more than 100 years, May Day has symbolized the common struggles of workers around the globe. Why is it largely ignored in North America? The answer lies in part in American labour's long repression of its own radical past, out of which international May Day was actually born a century ago.

The seeds were sown in the campaign for the eight-hour work day. On May 1, 1886, hundreds of thousands of North American workers mobilized to strike. In Chicago, the demonstration spilled over into support for workers at a major farm-implements factory who'd been locked out for union activities. On May 3, during a pitched battle between picketers and scabs, police shot two workers. At a protest rally in Haymarket Square the next day, a bomb was tossed into the police ranks and police directed their fire indiscriminately at the crowd. Eight anarchist leaders were arrested, tried and sentenced to death (three were later pardoned).

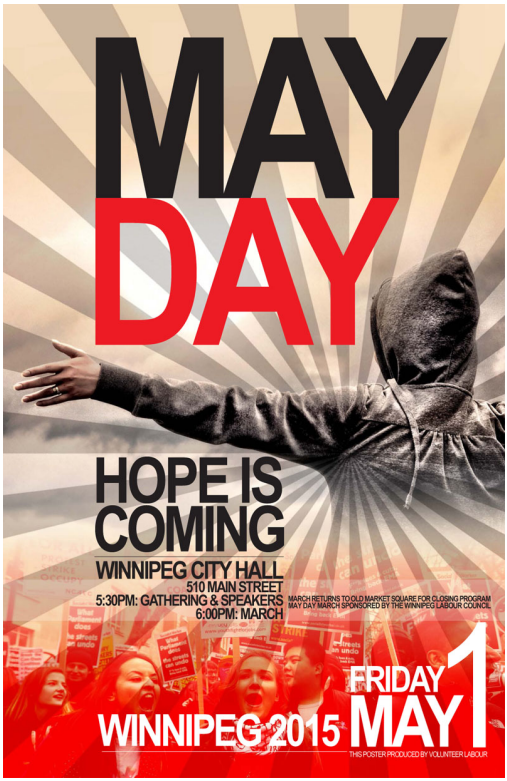
These events triggered international protests, and in 1889, the first congress of the new socialist parties associated with the Second International (the successor to the First International organized by Karl Marx in the 1860s) called on workers everywhere to join in an annual one-day strike on May 1 – not so much to demand specific reforms as an annual demonstration of labour solidarity and working-class power. May Day was both a product of, and an element in, the rapid growth of new mass working-class parties of Europe – which soon forced official recognition by employers and governments of this "workers' holiday."

But the American Federation of Labor, chastened by the "red scare" that followed the Haymarket events, went along with those who opposed May Day observances. Instead, in 1894, the AFL embraced president Grover Cleveland's decree that the first Monday of September would be the annual Labor Day. The Canadian government of Sir Robert Thompson enacted identical Labour Day legislation a month later.

Ever since, May Day and Labour Day have represented in North America the two faces of working-class political tradition, one symbolizing its revolutionary potential, the other its long search for reform and respectability. With the support of the state and business, the latter has predominated – but the more radical tradition has never been entirely suppressed.

This radical May Day tradition is nowhere better captured than in Bryan Palmer's monumental book, *Cultures of Darkness: Night Travels in the Histories of Transgression [From Medieval to Modern]* (Monthly Review Press, 2000). Palmer, one of Canada's foremost Marxist labour historians, has done more than anyone to recover and analyze the cultures of resistance that working people developed in practising class struggle from below. He's strongly critical of labour-movement leaders who've appealed to those elements of working-class culture that crave ersatz bourgeois respectability.

Set amid chapters on peasants and witches in late feudalism, on pirates and slaves during the rise of mercantile imperialism, on fraternal lodge members and anarchists in the new cities of industrial capitalism, on lesbians, homosexuals and communists under fascism, and on the mafia, youth gangs and race riots, jazz, beats and bohemians in modern U.S. capitalism, are two chapters that brilliantly tell the story of May Day. One locates Haymarket in the context of the Victorian bourgeoisie's fears of what they called the "dangerous classes." This account confirms the



central role of the "anarcho-communist movement in Chicago [which] was blessed with talented leaders, dedicated ranks and the most active left-wing press in the country. The dangerous classes were becoming truly dangerous."

The other chapter, a survey of "Festivals of Revolution," locates "the celebratory May Day, a festive seizure of working-class initiative that encompassed demands for shorter hours, improvement in conditions, and socialist agitation and organization" against the backdrop of the traditional spring calendar of class confrontation.

Over the past century communist revolutions were made in the name of the working class, and social democratic parties were often elected into government. In their different ways, both turned May Day to the purposes of the state. Before the 20th century was out the communist regimes imploded in internal contradictions between authoritarianism and the democratic purpose of socialism, while most social democratic ones, trapped in the internal contradictions between the welfare state and increasingly powerful capital markets, accommodated to neo-liberalism and become openly disdainful of "old labour."

As for the United States, the tragic legacy of the repression of its radical labour past is an increasingly de-unionized working class mobilized by fundamentalist Christian churches. Canada, with its NDP and 30-per-cent unionized labour force, looks good by comparison.

Working classes have suffered defeat after defeat in this era of capitalist globalization. But they're also in the process of being transformed: The decimated industrial proletariat of the global North is being replaced by a bigger industrial proletariat in the global South. In both regions, a new working class is still being formed in the new service and communication sectors spawned by global capitalism (where the eight-hour day is often unknown). Union movements and workers' parties from Poland to Korea to South Africa to Brazil have been spawned in the past 20 years. Two more book out of Monthly Review Press – Ursula Huw's *The Making of a Cybertariat* (2003) and the late Daniel Singer's *Whose Millennium? Theirs or Ours?* (1999) – don't deal with May Day per se, but capture particularly well this global economic and political transformation. They tell much that is sober yet inspiring about why May I still symbolizes the struggle for a future beyond capitalism rather than just a homage to the struggles of the past. •

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# Unions and the Crisis: Ways Forward?

## Greg Albo

The political and economic setting facing the union movement today is, perhaps, the most difficult since the Great Depression. Unions had already confronted two decades of unrelenting assault from neoliberal policies of labour market flexibility, austerity and political conservatism. Then, the global financial crisis triggered by defaults in the U.S. subprime mortgage market starting in 2006 ripped across the entire world market. Indeed, many forecasts for 2009 are projecting negative growth for the world economy as a whole for the first time since the 1930s. It is no longer uncommon to hear discussion of the possibility of depression from the most apologetic for capitalism.

The extent of the economic slowdown already makes for sober reading. In the fourth quarter of 2008, economic output fell, on an annualized basis, by six per cent in both the U.S. and the Euro zone, and an astonishing 12 and 20 per cent in Japan and Korea respectively. Chinese economic growth has also been cut in half, and exports have fallen by 40 to 50 per cent across East Asia. No zone of the world market is being insulated. Canada's economic growth has also turned negative, and forecasts suggest negative growth in the order of two to three per cent for 2009.

The tally of financial losses is quite staggering. The Asian Development Bank has estimated that financial assets worldwide have declined by some $50-trillion (which is about the same amount as annual global output). Western banks have written down about $1-trillion in assets, and estimates run from $3 to $5-trillion of losses in the banking sector alone. The U.S. government alone has already committed $9-trillion to its financial sector in various forms to maintain solvency. The sheer magnitude of the debt means that depressed economic conditions are likely to be long-lasting, and the distributional struggles very intense over how the bad debt – 'toxic assets' is the euphemism of the day to disguise the massive market failure and incompetency of the financial sector – is destroyed, socialized or inflated away.

The financial chaos is causing untold damage to workers. The International Labour Organization (ILO) has suggested that global job losses could reach as high as 51 million for 2009. In Canada, the devastation in the labour market is already immense. Unemployment has already climbed to 7.7 per cent, with almost 300,000 jobs being lost since October alone, and almost all new jobs created being part-time.

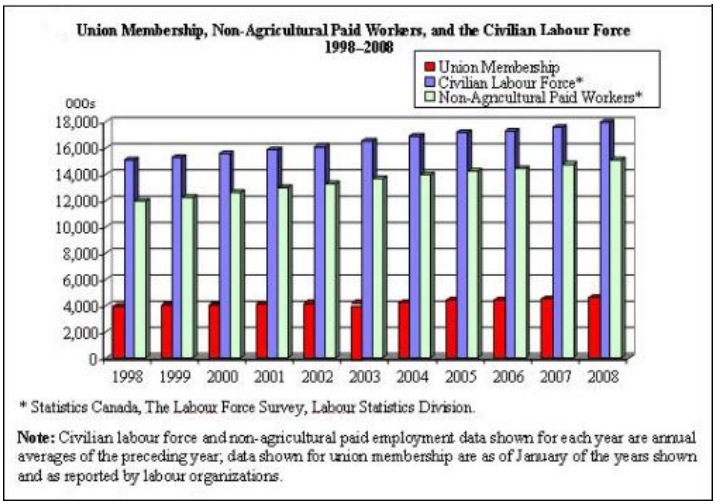
## Capitalist Strategies

It is impossible to calculate how deep or prolonged the economic recession might be. Competitive imperatives will compel capitalist firms (as well as state employers) to restructure workplaces and challenge union contracts. This will build on what is now a three decades old 'employers' offensive.'

The offensive emerged in the late 1970s as capitalists attempted to restore company profitability and control over the labour process after considerable erosion over the postwar boom. The rate of profit had fallen by about half over the postwar decades across virtually all zones of the world market. The fall was especially sharp in North America. The decline in profit rates coincided with a push by unions and workers to gain an increasing share of output, to expand public services and to address inequalities facing women and racial minorities. These efforts were backed by the largest and longest strike wave in the history of the advanced capitalist countries – with Canada consistently leading in days lost due to strikes – from the mid-1960s to across the 1970s.

The capitalist classes responded with a number of strategies to the union militancy and declining profits. At the level of the state, neoliberal policies from the 1980s on deregulated markets, imposed fiscal austerity, cut welfare, liberalized trade and capital flows and so on. In terms of workplaces, this meant increased 'flexibility' in terms of job controls, wages and employment.

In terms of wages, for example, the focus was on curbing real wage gains for workers and breaking a linkage between productivity gains and



annual wage improvements. More of output increases would thus go toward profits. This initially occurred in the 1970s via inflation eroding bargained money wages. But from the 1980s on it came in the form of pressures from high unemployment rates restraining collective bargaining demands. Except for a few years, the wage austerity has been unrelenting.

A number of other strategies radically reshaped work relations. Firms have re-organized their labour processes into international production networks and shifted work into low-wage, weak-union production zones. Information and communications technologies have facilitated the introduction of 'lean production' intensifying work processes. Employers have broken with 'standard' work arrangements and increasingly resort to contingent work arrangements, cheap migrant labour pools and temporary work programmes. In collective bargaining, unions increasingly trade-off wage restraint and workplace concessions against job security, agree to co-management schemes for firm competitiveness, and even enter into 'voluntary recognition agreements' to gain members while giving up the right to strike and other job controls. The employers' offensive has made 'competitive unionism' the dominant practice, in both the public and private sectors, in North America.

The economic crisis has made employers even more militant in their demands for wage austerity and concessions. One strategy has been cuts to negotiated health benefits (insurance plans in the U.S.) for current employees and retirees, as well as other benefits. Another emerging strategy is to redefine – or even walk away from – pension obligations, as has occurred in the steel and auto sectors and in numerous non-unionized companies. Work intensification is also occurring as workers are being pushed to give up time-off, holidays, work breaks, and so forth. And capitalists are increasingly using bankruptcy proceedings (or the threat of it) to crack open union contracts and demand sharp cuts to wages and benefits. The airline and steel industries in both Canada and the U.S. have adopted this strategy; it is now most visible in the auto manufacturing and parts sectors. In the public sector, such cuts have long been a consequence of privatization.

The underlying logic of all these strategies remains shifting the share of new value produced toward company profits and away from workers' wages and expanding public services. There is little in current collective bargaining that is not reinforcing the worst features of neoliberalism.

## New Political Openings?

Up to the financial crisis, these capitalist strategies proved quite successful in re-establishing profitability and capitalist power. This is not

to say that growth was at same pace as the postwar period or that economic hardship did not result for most workers. As Marx pointed out in Capital, the 'general law of capitalist accumulation' is the amassing of profits and wealth at one pole and a reserve army of labour and social needs left unmet at another.

Marx also argued in *Capital* that each phase of accumulation contained the seeds of its own destruction. The internal contradictions of neoliberalism are now readily apparent: fictitious capital and debt massively growing relative to the growth of productive capacity and the deterioration of public services; wage compression leading to increasingly indebted working classes and unstable conditions for effective demand; the undermining of extra-market regulatory capacities to constrain capitalist competition, speculative bubbles and fraud as an endemic feature of financialization; and huge international payments imbalances reinforcing dependence on the world market while spreading its potential instabilities.

Neoliberal and free market ideology is now totally discredited. But capitalist strategies and government policies are attempting to reconstruct neoliberalism as the basis for again restoring capitalist profitability. This is the political challenge the union movement now faces.

Many union activists had already been pointing out for some time that conventional collective bargaining strategies and union politics were only leading to further setbacks and concessions. The economic crisis has now made this obvious to everyone. Existing union strategies are neither confrontational enough to challenge capitalist workplace strategies after years of concessions. Nor are they politically ambitious enough to form the necessary anti-capitalist strategies to form the political agendas and organizational capacities to forge an alternate approach to the crisis.

There are, however, several hopeful signs of union renewal that could begin to chart a new direction. In North America, some of this has come from 'living wage' struggles led by local labour councils in major cities, in alliance with community groups, to reach out to the low-waged and unorganized, who are predominantly women and people of colour. The mass immigrants' rights May Day protests, as well as the day-to-day campaigns for the protection of non-status workers, have taken place outside the main union movements, but also led to new linkages and alliances. A number of campaigns – notably some of the anti-privatization struggles around healthcare, universities and municipal services – have had successes across several countries. These community-union alliances, often coupled with major campaigns and demonstrations, suggest enormous potential.

There also have been interesting examples of a new organizational internationalism amongst unions. The efforts to coordinate aspects of collective bargaining in the steel, auto and healthcare sectors, extending from North America to both Europe and Latin America, to confront work issues spread across international production networks, is one example. The campaign against the militantly anti-union Wal-Mart is also suggestive. International solidarity campaigns, such as those with Palestinian workers in the Occupied Territories and inside apartheid Israel, against the continued assaults on unionists in Columbia, for the rights of migrant workers, or for the rights of workers in countries like Venezuela to experiment in workers' control, also are promising signs of organizational renewal.

In the context of the economic crisis, it is necessary to form a set of demands that might converge across different struggles and sectors to embed an anti-market logic in bargaining that might offset the worst features of the slowdown. In terms of workplace struggles, a core set of campaigns might be:

1. the fight against concessions in wages and benefits;
2. in the preservation of negotiated pensions;
3. building in annual reductions in work-time within wage negotiations;
4. support for plant occupations and community seizure of assets, particularly in cases of bankruptcy and firms receiving state subsidies; and
5. extension of all other forms of hours reduction in terms of parental leaves, annual holidays, over-time, and so on.

A set of union demands directed at the economic crisis is also important:

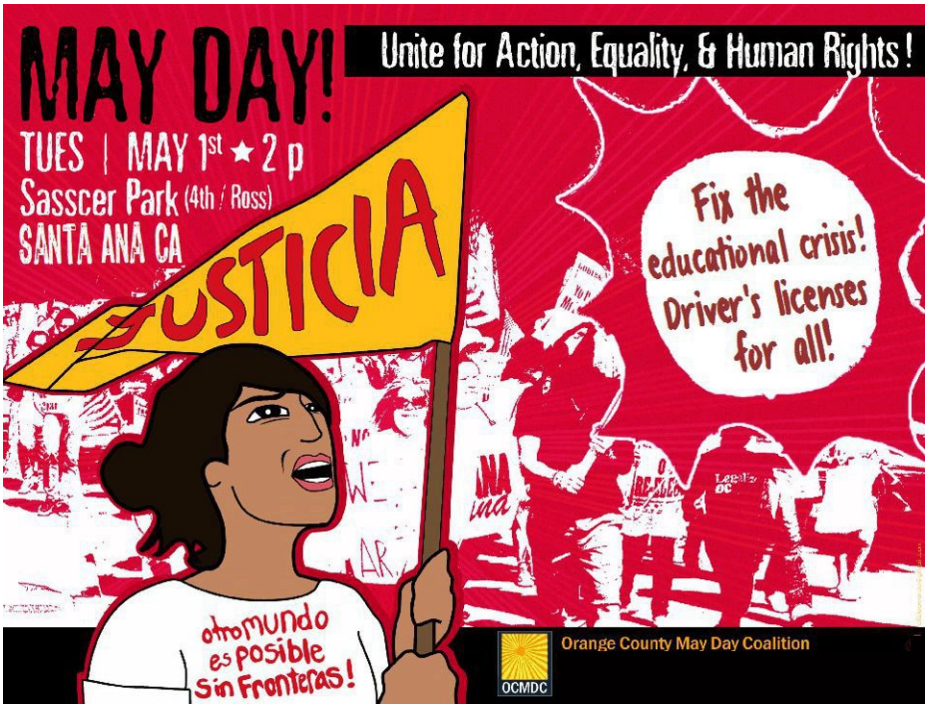
6. the overhaul or unemployment insurance systems in terms of benefits, principles of eligibility and administration;
7. industrial strategies directed at ecologically responsible production;
8. massive extension of 'green jobs' in the culture, leisure, and sporting sectors;
9. nationalization of the banking sector;
10. building a national childcare system;
11. nationalization of the transportation sector and development of a national mass transit strategy; and
12. establishment of a national housing programme.

## Ways Forward

These types of demands, of course, have been percolating through the union and socialist movement for some time. They would also require the

formation of basic planning capacities in a quite different kind of state than now exists. They will receive no support from the ruling class power structures in Canada or the USA. They will depend on reversing the decline of the union movement and the wider impasse of the Left. Working class political organization has in the past achieved a great deal: leading de-colonization struggles; campaigning for the expansion of freedoms and equality to women and racial and sexual minorities; improving wages and benefits; and agitating for the extension of universal welfare states.

The social forces that achieved these gains are now quite something else: the communist parties have all but disappeared even in places where they once held power (or they have made their peace with capitalism as in China); the social democratic parties now chart a 'Third Way' and no longer even pose a reform agenda to neoliberalism; unions are in retreat; and many civil society movements have evolved into professionalised NGOs navigating the grant economy. The central political coordinates for labour movements over the last century – being for or against the Russian revolution; attempting a vanguard seizure of the existing state apparatus



or reforming it piecemeal; conceiving unions as primarily the industrial wing of this or that political party – no longer provide any kind of map for the struggles unions and workers now confront.

For a brief moment, it seemed as if a decentralized 'network politics' – a 'movement of movements' – would provide, if not a map for the future, a renewed political capacity for the Left. It was represented in the hopeful 'Teamsters and Turtles' slogan of the heady days of the anti-globalization movement. But apart from episodic demonstrations and annual social justice fairs, the networks have broken apart more often than they have provided new organizational nodes. There has been almost a complete lack of organizational grounding in the day-to-day struggles of working class communities, workplaces and unions.

This 'anti-power' politics is now being eclipsed by new political experiments beginning from – and not against – organizational commitments to unions and political parties. In Latin America, this has taken place under the banner of building 21st century socialism in a number of countries. A 'new' New Left appears to be emerging from the margins in Greece, Germany, France, Portugal and other places as well.

Under the pressure of events, some sections of the North American Left are also beginning to pose the question of how to build anti-neoliberal – and at times anti-capitalist – alliances and a new political organization of a pluralist Left. From their anchor in workplace struggles and in particular communities, a renewed union movement is a crucial component of such a new Left. Indeed, in representing the deep diversity of workers and their issues – in terms of gender, racial background, sexual diversity, and so forth – unions have been leading society in this area over the period of neoliberalism rather than following it.

Moving on will require forming new political capacities and an organizational openness and creativity that the Left in North America has not shown for some time. The long decline of unions in the face of powerful capitalist strategies to restore their power over the neoliberal period had already made this clear. It has now become an imperative. That realization is always the point of a new beginning. •

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# Fragile Economies, Aggressive Bosses and Struggling Workers

Ingo Schmidt

Stock markets around the world have made up the losses they incurred during the 2008-09 financial crisis and the workers of the world are paying the price for this recovery. Fiscal stimulus packages and bank bailouts that helped to contain the crisis left governments with deficits that are now being used as a pretext for spending cuts and layoffs in the public sector. At the same time, rising unemployment has had a dampening effect on wages. Losing a decently paid job to join the ranks of the working poor is very common these days. The pervasive feelings of social insecurity amongst workers is the greatest in decades.

Not surprisingly, then, inequality within and between countries is on the rise almost everywhere. Yet, redistribution from the bottom to the top does not create an equal level of misery that would allow different kinds of workers to recognize each other as equals easily and would recruit them into a common front against capital automatically. Quite to the contrary: rising inequality also deepens the divisions between male and female workers, white- and non-white workers, and Canadians and immigrant workers. These divisions within the working-class allow capitalists to pit one group of workers against another and, by doing so, keep the general redistribution machine going. Redistributing incomes toward the corporate sector boosts not only stock prices but corporate profits too. Massive government intervention during the financial and economic crises saved the free market agenda.

## Neoliberal Cracks

Still, things are not the same anymore. Rising stock prices should not deflect attention away from the frailness of economic recovery since 2009. Though still at a very high level, growth in China is slowing, economies in the U.S., Brazil and Japan are stagnant while Europe is back in recession. Thanks to redistribution of incomes from the poor to the rich and generous government support, private corporations are awash with cash.

But the corporations see no reason to invest in production capacity and employment in the face of already existing over-capacities and little prospect of aggregate demand increases that would boost consumption any time soon. Putting money into the stock market under such conditions is more a means of hoarding than the anticipation of the economic

prosperity to come. Austerity and the downgrading of workers have not been enough to restore business confidence.

Financial investors and corporate CEOs have at least two reasons to be concerned about the future. One is that the ruling class, in the form of the policy elites in governments, central bankers, and the heads of international organizations, is deeply divided about strategy.

Central banking doves, such as at the U.S. Federal Reserve and the Bank of Japan, think unlimited amounts of cheap money are the only way of re-booting economic growth; while hawks, such as at the Deutsche Bundesbank or the Bank of China, warn the only effect of near-zero interest rates and quantitative easing is ballooning money supply that will feed into inflation. Concerns about inflation are grossly out of touch with the realities of stagnating economies in which companies would price themselves out of the market if they asked customers to pay more.

However, the hawks have a point by arguing that unlimited supplies of money do not automatically lead to higher sales of consumer or investment goods. For these hardcore neoliberals, pushing down wages, social and ecological standards would provide an incentive to companies to increase investment spending. Of course, that has not been the case. Otherwise, the onslaught on jobs and wages that followed the 2008/09 crises would have led to an economic boom rather than stagnation.

The frailty of the economy is precisely the reason why central bank hawks have not had it their way. Everyone who is not a die-hard believer, or who does not want to produce an economic collapse, understands that cheap money from the central bank may not trigger economic activity but that jacked up interest rates would push the economy into the abyss.

However, if stagnation continues while stock prices go up raising fears of another asset price bubble, it is conceivable that the boards of central banks will either change direction or will be unable to reach consensus. For the time being, the hawks accept the extremely lose monetary policies in return for fiscal retrenchment.

But this policy matrix has recently been questioned. While the European Union Troika (of the European Central Bank, the IMF and the European Commission) prescribes draconian austerity measures to crisis-ridden countries of its southern periphery and the U.S. government is paralyzed by its attempts to reign in its deficits, the IMF admits that the cuts it helped impose on Greece as part of the Troika 'bailout' pushed the country further into crisis.

The IMF Chief, Christine Lagarde, is now running all over the place urging governments to delay further spending cuts to avoid crashing an already fragile world economy. The political stalemate over U.S. fiscal policies, with moderate Democrats wanting to relax the austerity agenda and Republican hawks pushing for even more cuts, is setting a precedent for the policy impasse that is likely to beset other parts of the world.

## Growing Doubts

The possibility of political paralysis is not the only issue that plagues capitalist investors. Another concern is cracks in the neoliberal ideological consensus that underpinned the free market agenda for over thirty years, and successfully integrated via market discipline workers into a new collective bargaining regime governed by the maintenance of firm level competitiveness.

The mantra of 'trickle-down economics' was never particularly persuasive at a theoretical level, but it was at least something to believe in and it justified the massive restructuring in companies and the welfare state to increase the rate of exploitation in workplaces. And it was central to making other views, such as with socialist alternatives, look even less persuasive.

After the 2008-09 crisis and the mobilization of public funds for the protection of private profits, capitalists and government policy-makers changed their tune from the trickle-down promises of income gains in the future from restraint now to only promises of endless austerity and cuts into the future. This was an open declaration of 'class war from above.'

This is why the slogan, 'We're the 99%,' resonated so widely. It got even people who never reflect on anything political or economical to think

about class. And it wonderfully captured the bailing out of the banks and the corporate classes with public funds, while calling on sacrifices in income and public services from everyone else.

Austerity is the only policy game in town at this point in the core capitalist countries. But it has growing doubters amongst ruling elites and is deeply resented by the working classes. In the zones of severe crisis, the free market ideology is losing even more credibility, as in the case of the Southern European states. An upsurge in right-wing populism in many countries, from the American Tea Party to Golden Dawn fascists in Greece, is one of the expressions of the deep crisis of legitimacy that is befalling neoliberal capitalism in the midst of continuing economic crisis and another sharpening of economic inequalities.

## A New Uprising of Workers?

Another sign of uprising is, however, more promising. This is the series of mass protests and strikes, from the Arab Spring to the Wisconsin labour rebellion to dockworkers in Hong Kong, and on to some of recent signs of new electoral strength for the Left, such as in Greece by Syriza.

Less spectacular but potentially very significant are the efforts of Walmart and McDonald's workers to unionize. During the heyday of neoliberalism, the McDonaldization of work became a synonym for the downgrading of union jobs with decent pay and benefits into precarious low-wage work. The majority of the working poor that companies such as McDonald's employed are women. In the 1970s, the women's movement fought for equal pay in unionized workplaces and an expansion of public services that would allow them to enter the workforce. Beginning in the 1980s, more and more women began working the double shifts in low-wage occupations and unwaged household work. Companies such as Walmart, but also others like Starbucks, were seen as unorganizable and were vanguards in downsizing the working-class as a whole by creating new gender imbalances.

The same is true for the sweatshops that Chinese communists opened up for capitalist super-exploitation and whose lower-than-Walmart-wages are widely seen as benchmarks for global wage setting. Yet, Chinese workers have recently become among the most combative despite vigorous attempts by the Chinese state to prevent independent union organization and coordination amongst workers.

Still, vast numbers of work stoppages, local in scope and hindered by the lack of independent unions, won at least some wage gains. These gains are

lagging far behind productivity increases, so the shift from wages to profits continues in China as in much of the rest of the world. At the same time, though, they help alleviate lifting considerable numbers of workers out of the most miserable conditions of poverty.

So far, Canada has neither seen mass actions like the Wisconsin labour rebellion or recurrent general strikes in Southern Europe nor high numbers of local struggles like in China. Struggles, such as the one at Porter Airlines, are the exception rather than the rule of working-class life in Canada. There continues to be constant attacks by private and government employers, ranging from plant closures, demands for concessions and the use of government deficits to cut the public payroll.

The introduction of right-to-work laws in Indiana and Michigan has inspired provincial and federal governments to follow suit. Divided by jurisdictions, unionized workers all across Canada are facing the same challenge of defending their incomes and working conditions. Government and private employers' success in portraying union-workers as overpaid and lazy makes a fightback to such efforts extremely difficult. Organized labour will have to convince the wider public that the attack on unions is an attack on all workers. The union movement will need to draw non-union and unemployed workers into its ranks to win the coming battles against right-to-work legislation.

A general global labour resurgence cannot yet be claimed. The fact that workers all over the world are paying the price for the capitalist crisis clearly indicates that unions and the working classes are still on the defensive. The discontent with neoliberalism, and capitalism more generally, however, is spreading. Resistance continues to pop up in new, unexpected locations almost weekly. Alternatives to austerity are in high demand and, indeed, alternatives to capitalism in any number of forms are gaining attention. And workers, increasing numbers of them unemployed and with precarious livelihoods, are willing to fight for them.

These struggles have yet to yield much in the way of material gains. Many have been short-lived, defeated or co-opted, the Egyptian revolution being the most prominent. These setbacks also provide hard learned lessons about the need to develop more resilient and deeper organizing and mobilizing strategies in the future. There may be an alternative to austerity and capitalism, and a significant advance to the receptiveness of socialist ideas in Canada and North America. But it's a challenging road to get there. •

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# Feminism Against Capitalism

## Nicole M. Aschoff

Socialism and feminism have a long, and at times fraught, relationship. Socialists are often accused of overemphasizing class – of placing the structural divide between those who must work for a wage to survive and those who own the means of production at the center of every analysis.

Even worse they ignore or underplay how central other factors – like sexism, racism, or homophobia – are in shaping hierarchies of power. Or they admit the importance of these negative norms and practices, but argue that they can be rooted out only after we get rid of capitalism.

Meanwhile, socialists accuse mainstream feminists of focusing too much on individual rights rather than collective struggle and ignoring the structural divides between women. They accuse mainstream feminists of aligning themselves with bourgeois political projects that diminish the agency of working women or pushing middle-class demands that ignore the needs and desires of poor women, both in the Global North and South.

These are old debates that date back to the mid-nineteenth century and the First International, and revolve around deeply political questions of power and the contradictions of capitalist society.

Muddying the waters further is how the politics of feminism is complicated by the historical nature of capitalism – the way sexism is integrated into both processes of profit-making and the reproduction of the capitalist system as a whole is dynamic.

This dynamism is very apparent today when a female presidential candidate, Hillary Clinton, is the top choice among U.S. millionaires. But the divide between socialism and feminism is ultimately an unnecessary one.

## Why Socialists Should be Feminists

The oppression of women, both in U.S. society and globally, is multi-dimensional – gender divides in the political, economic, and social spheres underscore why, to free ourselves from the tyranny of capital, socialists must also be feminists.

The possibility of a woman finally becoming U.S. president highlights the stark lack of female leadership, both in the U.S. and around the world.

Despite powerful women like Angela Merkel, Christine LeGarde, Janet Yellen, and Dilma Rousseff, the gender balance in politics and the corporate world remains highly skewed. Only 4 per cent of CEOs at Fortune 500 firms are women and most corporate boards have few if any female members.

Globally, 90 per cent of heads of state are men, and at the 2015 World Economic Forum only 17 per cent of the 2,500 representatives present were women, while 2013 marked the first time women held twenty seats in the U.S. Senate.

Unlike many countries, women in the United States have, roughly speaking, equal rights and legal protection, as well as access to similar education, nutrition, and health care as men. But gender divides are apparent across society.

Women outperform men in higher education, but they don't achieve comparable levels of success or wealth and remain stereotyped and underrepresented in the popular media. Attacks on women's reproductive rights continue unabated, and after a long, steady decline through the 1990s, rates of violence against women haven't budged since 2005.

At the same time, decisions about balancing home life and work life, in the face of ever-increasing housing and child care costs, are as difficult as ever. In the fifty years since the passage of the 1963 Equal Pay Act, women have entered the workforce en masse; today 60 per cent of women work outside the home. Single and married mothers are even more likely to work, including 57 per cent of mothers with children under the age of one.


But women who work full time still earn only 81 per cent of what men do – a number inflated by faster declines in men's wages (aside from the college-educated) in recent years.

Pay gaps are matched by a gendered division of labour. The retail, service, and food sectors – the center of new

job growth – are dominated by women, and the feminization of "care" work is even more pronounced. Despite recent gains, like the extension of the Fair Labor Standards Act to domestic workers, care work is still seen as women's work and undervalued. Disproportionate numbers of caring jobs are low-paying, contingent gigs in which humiliation, harassment, assault, and wage theft are common.

In addition to these clear differences between the experiences of men and women in the U.S. there are more insidious, long-range effects of sexism. Feminists like bell hooks argue that sexism and racism pervade all corners of society and that dominant narratives of power glorify white, heteronormative visions of life.

From birth, boys and girls are treated differently, and gender stereotypes introduced in the home, school, and everyday life are perpetuated throughout women's lives, shaping their identities and life choices.

Sexism also plays a less obvious, but critical, role in profit-making. From the beginning, capitalism has relied on unpaid labour outside the labour market (mainly in the home) that provides the essential ingredient for capital accumulation: workers – who must be created, clothed, fed, socialized, and loved.

This unpaid labour is highly gendered. While more men take part in household chores and child-rearing than in the past, social reproduction still falls primarily on women, who are expected to shoulder the heaviest burden of household tasks.

Most women also perform paid labour outside the home turning their work in the home into a "second shift." In this way, women are doubly oppressed – exploited in the workplace and unrecognized as workers in the social reproduction of labour.

## Why Feminists Should be Socialists

These persistent, cross-class gender divides – in the political, economic, and social spheres – fuel the dominant feminist viewpoint that sexism is a thing apart from capitalism, something that must be tackled separately.

Throughout numerous waves of feminist struggle, activists have pursued a variety of strategies for combating sexism and gender divides. Today, mainstream feminists gravitate toward a focus on putting women in power – both in the political and economic sphere – as a way to solve the range of problems women face, such as wage inequality, violence, work-life balance, and sexist socialization.

Prominent spokeswomen like Sheryl Sandberg, Hillary Clinton, Anne-Marie Slaughter, and many others advocate this "take-power" feminist strategy. Sandberg – one of the most influential proponents of this strategy – argues that women need to stop being afraid and start "disrupting the status quo." If they do, she believes this generation can close the leadership gap and in doing so make the world a better place for all women.

The thrust of the take-power argument is that if women were in power they, unlike men, would take care to implement policies that benefit women and that cross-class gender divides in economic, political, and cultural spheres will only be eliminated if women hold an equal number of leadership positions to men.

The emphasis on individual advancement as the path to achieving the goals of feminism is not new, and has been critiqued by numerous feminists including Charlotte Bunch and Susan Faludi, who question the notion of sisterly solidarity as a remedy for deep-seated gender divides. As Faludi says, "You can't change the world for women by simply inserting female faces at the top of an unchanged system of social and economic power."

Socialist feminists like Johanna Brenner also point to how mainstream feminism glosses over deep tensions among women:

> "We can generously characterize as ambivalent the relationships between working-class women/poor women and the middle-class professional women whose jobs it is to uplift and regulate those who come to be defined as problematic – the poor, the unhealthy, the culturally unfit, the sexually deviant, the ill-educated. These class tensions bleed into feminist politics, as middle-class feminist advocates claim to represent working-class women."

So while it is certainly necessary to recognize how gendered contemporary society remains, it is also necessary to be clear-eyed about how to overcome these divides and, equally important, to recognize the limitations of a feminism that doesn't challenge capitalism.

Capital feeds on existing norms of sexism, compounding the exploitative nature of wage work. When women's ambitions and desires are silenced or undervalued, they are easier to take advantage of. Sexism is part of the company toolkit, enabling firms to pay women less – particularly women of color – and otherwise discriminate against them.

But even if we root out sexism, the inherent contradictions of capitalism will persist. It is important and necessary that women step into positions of power, but this won't change the fundamental divide between workers and owners – between women at the top and women at the bottom.

It won't change the fact that most women find themselves in precarious, low-wage jobs that present a far greater barrier to advancement and a comfortable life than sexism in the economic or political sphere. It won't change the power of the profit motive and the compulsion of companies to give workers as little as economic, social, and cultural norms will allow.

Of course, society is not reducible to the wage relation, and gender divides are real and persistent. Taking class seriously means anchoring the oppression of women within the material conditions in which they live and work while recognizing the role of sexism in shaping both women's work life and their home life.

The feminist movement – both its "social-welfare" incarnation and its radical contemporary – has made significant gains. The challenge now is twofold: to defend these hard-won victories and make it possible for all women to actually enjoy them, and to push forward with new, concrete demands that address the complex relationship between sexism and profit-making.

There is no simple answer to how to accomplish these twin goals. In the past, women have made the biggest gains by fighting for both women's rights and workers' rights simultaneously – linking the fight against sexism to the fight against capital.

As Eileen Boris and Anelise Orleck argue, during the 1970s and '80s, "trade union feminists helped launch a revitalized women's movement

that sparked new demands for women's rights at home, on the job, and within unions." Airline stewardesses, garment workers, clericals, and domestic workers challenged the male-dominated trade union movement (a woman didn't sit on the AFL-CIO executive board until 1980) and in the process forged a new, more expansive feminism.

Trade union women created a new field of possibility by demanding not only higher wages and equal opportunity but also child care, flexible work schedules, pregnancy leave, and other gains usually overlooked or undervalued by their union brothers.

This is the direction that both socialists and feminists should be orienting themselves – toward struggles and demands that challenge both the drives of capital and the ingrained norms of sexism that are so deeply rooted under capitalism.

Struggles and demands that achieve this are concrete and are currently being fought for. For example, the struggle for single-payer healthcare – which would provide healthcare as a right to every person from cradle to grave regardless of their ability to pay – is a demand that undermines both sexism and the power of capital to control and repress worker agency. There are many other concrete short-term demands that blend the goals of feminism and socialism as well, including free higher education, free child care, and a universal basic income combined with a robust social safety net.

These reforms would lay the groundwork for more radical goals that would go far in rooting out sexism, exploitation, and the commodification of social life. For example, projects to increase collective, democratic control over institutions central to our home, school, and work lives – schools, banks, workplaces, city governments, and state and local agencies – would give all women and men more power, autonomy, and the possibility for a better life.

This anticapitalist strategy is one that contains the possibility for the radical change that women need.

Ultimately the goals of a radical feminism and socialism are the same – justice and equality for all people, not simply equal opportunity for women or equal participation by women in an unjust system. •

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# Dining Out in Dinkytown: Remembering the Minneapolis Truckers' Strikes of 1934

**Bryan D. Palmer**

If you are in Minneapolis, after a hard day's night, the place to go for a morning pick-me-up is Al's Breakfast. Or so I was informed. Being in the Twin Cities in mid-July, I made my way to the legendary AM eatery, located in the heart of Dinkytown, the neighborhood adjacent to the University of Minnesota where Al's is located.

Mind you, no one had told me anything about the place. My heart sank as I rounded the 14th Avenue corner and took in the line that had formed outside of an establishment half way down the block. As I shuffled into place at the end of the queue and glanced inside my spirits nose-dived even further.

The place wasn't so much a restaurant as a refurbished alleyway. Indeed, its origins, I later ascertained, were just that. The space was once a converted corridor separating two stores, first used to stockpile sheet metal and plumbing parts by a hardware outlet. It was 'made-over' into a restaurant in 1950. At ten feet wide, with a mere fourteen stools, its mid-century clientele consisted largely of railroad workers.

Over the years Al's has become renowned for its waffles, blueberry pancakes, and ingenious egg concoctions, its quick-paced pack-'em-in bravado, and the banter of its wait staff and cooks. No time is wasted on the pseudo-niceties of sycophantic service. Placards on the wall set the tone: "Not Responsible for Alienated Affections"; "Beware of Waitress With An Attitude." But the place wins national awards, attracts the cognoscenti, and clearly has strong advocates.

Not much of this was evident as I waited outside behind fifteen or so hungry patrons. Another dozen stood inside Al's, leaning against the wall and looming over the shoulders of the fortunately-seated customers. I wondered if I would eat before noon.

The four guys in front of me must have sensed my unease, appreciating that I was a first timer. "Don't worry," they assured me, "the line moves quickly." "Where are you from?"

## Talkin' Union

Introductions made, the conversation turned to why I was in Minneapolis. My new-found friends were astounded that I had flown from Toronto to be part of a series of events commemorating the 1934 Teamsters' strikes.

These class struggles were momentous battles. Workers and their 'special deputy' opponents died in picket line confrontations. The conflict raged over collective bargaining rights for coal heavers, market produce haulers, and truck drivers. When I told the group lining up for breakfast that the top wage demanded by this motley crew was less than 50 cents an hour, it was all news to them.

As I explained that the three strikes waged between February and August in 1934 were part of a nation-wide class upheaval that brought workers out of the doldrums of the Great Depression and into new forms of unionism that organized the unorganized and defeated die-hard anti-labour employers, they were surprised. "In Minneapolis," they seemed to shrug, "who knew?"

Elaborating on all of this, I recounted how the Teamsters had grown locally from a union with no more than 175 members in 1933 to a vibrant presence in Minneapolis, 7,000 strong. Once an employer-dominated 'open shop town', Minneapolis was transformed. It became a 'union city'. I explained how this breakthrough then exploded into an eleven-state over-the-road teamster organizing drive that quadrupled the national membership of the International Brotherhood, pushing it past the 500,000 mark by 1940.

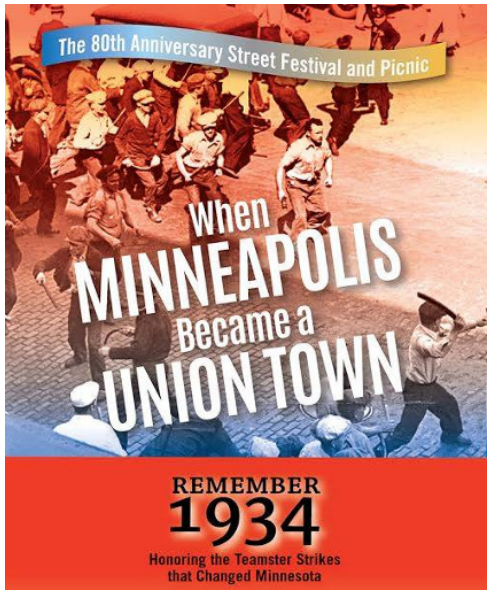
## The Hoffa Hangover

Jimmy Hoffa, before he was gangstered-up, learned how to organize truckers in this late 1930s mobilization, spearheaded out of the Minnesota metropole. "Minneapolis Teamsters," my morning conversationalists replied in wonder. "Really! They did this?" To them, teamsters were a stereotype, a muscle-shirt wearing contingent of independent-contract drivers, under the tutelage of a racketeering officialdom.

And this clearly has had its local story-line.

As late as 2012, Local 120 of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT), serving Minneapolis and adjacent centers and the direct descendant of the union that waged the strikes of 1934, was rocked with a corruption scandal. A report undertaken by a Teamster union review

board revealed that a father-son Secretary-Treasurer/President duo had diverted hundreds of thousands of dollars of membership funds into a variety of construction, enterprise, sporting ticket, and other schemes that resulted in the local being put under trusteeship by IBT union boss, James Hoffa, Jr., not to be confused with his father Jimmy.




Hoffa Sr., after presiding over the IBT from the late 1950s, was convicted on jury tampering, attempted bribery, and fraud charges in the early 1960s. Sentenced to 13 years in prison, Hoffa delayed the inevitable with appeal after appeal. Eventually he went to jail. Incarcerated for less than one-third of his time, Hoffa was pardoned by Richard Nixon in 1971. He then disappeared in 1975, widely thought to have been murdered by the mob in Detroit.

Jimmy Hoffa, then, consolidated a view of the Teamsters as corrupt that was, in places like Minneapolis, confirmed by modern developments. One Local 120 critic voiced disgust at the 2012 revelations, claiming that the union had become little more than 'a good-old-boys club.' He reported that it was impossible to get rid of those embezzling union funds and engaging in all manner of fraudulent schemes, including a union-run, money-losing bar in Fargo, North Dakota. That venture managed to see $200,000 worth of liquor and beer go missing.

Fargo, I thought when I became aware of this sordid bit of recent Minneapolis Teamster history – Joel and Ethan Coen clearly miscast the players in their dark comedy about murder, used car dealerships, and development schemes. They should have set the stage with Local 120 characters and their tavern-tampering ways.

## A Revolutionary Leadership and Its Day in (Bourgeois/Kangaroo) Court

The leaders of these 1934 Minneapolis strikes were an entirely different breed. They adhered to the views of Leon Trotsky, and were organized in a group known as the Communist League of America (CLA) that would

later develop into the Socialist Workers Party (SWP). Barely half-a-dozen of these revolutionary Trotskyists had been agitating in the coal yards and among truckers since the late 1920s, and their patient efforts led to the victory of the 1934 strikes.

So successful were these teamster leaders that the state, the employers, the IBT bureaucracy (with Jimmy Hoffa as its head thug), and even the Communist Party colluded in World War II to displace and defeat them. The low point of this vendetta: two show trials of the early 1940s that saw the Minneapolis revolutionary teamsters and other genuine workers' leaders convicted on trumped-up treason charges. Twenty-nine individuals were hauled into court, 18 of them railroaded to jail.

The real crime of the Trotskyists and teamster leaders was that they created strikingly effective ways of confronting employers and built new and democratic forms of mass unionism that challenged the status quo on all kinds of levels. They battled the trucking bosses with panache.

## Organizing Workers to Win

New strike tactics such as the flying pickets that roved Minneapolis streets in 1934, chasing down scab trucks, were devised and implemented. Teamster leaders developed an extensive 'intelligence network', and were well informed by secretaries working for various enterprises of what the trucking magnates were preparing to do next. To get its message out to thousands of members, scattered throughout Minneapolis, the union took to the skies and the streets, enlisting an airplane and a squad of teenaged motorcyclists.

Strikes were planned down to the last detail. A massive union headquarters was staffed with dispatchers, a commissary was outfitted, and a make-shift hospital to care for the wounded was put in place. Refusing to be hoodwinked by the tired leadership of the IBT, these workers' leaders instead involved the rank-and-file in strike committees 100-strong, drew the unemployed to work with the union, and organized a women's auxiliary that attracted wives and daughters, mothers and aunts, to the necessity of building unionism.

Winning truckers and others in the transportation industry to militant activism, these leaders championed open discussions in regularly-convened mass meetings, favoring public votes of all union members rather than secret ballots. When they actually secured paid union positions after their 1934 strike victories, the revolutionary Trotskyists guiding the teamsters' insurgency instituted salary scales for themselves

insuring that union officials were paid no more than those working in the industry.

These revolutionaries also gained the confidence and respect of labouring men and women by helping their working-class confreres in time of need. They also suffered firings, beatings, and jailings. Encouraging workers to think independently, in the midst of the strikes of 1934 they put out a daily newspaper, *The Organizer*. This strike bulletin used innovative means, among them satire and humor, to convince labourers that it was necessary to fight for their rights.

## Class War Warriors and the Red Scare

In the late 1930s, fascists threatened to organize in Minneapolis, realizing that the victories achieved in the 1934 strikes needed to be turned back if their reactionary cause was to succeed. Known as the Silver Shirts, these reactionaries talked of infiltrating the unions, making them nurseries of recruitment to right-wing thought, cultivating opposition to class-based understandings of the social order. They propagated a pernicious racism and anti-Semitism.

Trotskyists immediately saw the danger this posed. They formed an armed contingent of workers known as the Union Defense Guard. Its 'commander' was Ray Rainbolt, a Sioux Nation trucker and SWP member. He drilled the rifle-bearing workers and railed against the Silver Shirts and their project. Preparedness was the watchword among these revolutionaries. But workers arming themselves didn't curry favor with the Justice Department and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, both of which were involved in the later legal onslaught against the Minneapolis teamsters.

Nor did the affront of labour effectively standing up against its class adversaries win the Minneapolis teamsters acclaim locally, at least as far as conventional authority was concerned. The General Drivers Union, known as Local 574, and its Trotskyist leadership were vilified in the mainstream newspapers. Anti-communism blanketed Minneapolis in 1934 like a dense fog; you could cut it with a dull bourgeois blade. Demanding 42-and-a-half cents an hour for the drivers and insisting on the right of those handling crates of vegetables in the market to join the union were the thin edge of a wedge ostensibly opening the door to a Soviet Minneapolis. Or so the Citizen's Alliance, the employers' voice in the strikes, claimed.

*The Organizer* countered, "They accuse us in this local of being un-American but how's this for some real Am. Members: Happy Holstein, Chippewa; Ray Rainbolt, Sioux; Doc Tollotson, Chippewa; Bill Bolt, Chippewa; Bill Rogers, Chippewa; Joe Belanger, Chippewa." The Red Scare was no doubt driven by the employers and their political and socio-cultural allies, but conservative labourites also contributed. One Native American wrote as "A member of 574, not a Communist, but a Chippewa Indian and a real American." He protested the ways in which the ossified trade union tops occupying the plush office seats at the headquarters of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters red-baited the Minneapolis strike leadership. These underhanded attacks did the bosses' bidding, adding 'fuel to the fire' of the employer association's anti-communism.

## Unions as History

As it turns out, my breakfast partners to be were educators in the public school system. They did not much like their teachers' federations. "Hadn't unions become too big and powerful and reactionary?" asked my chatty mates. "Hadn't labour organizations outlived their usefulness?" Trade unions, in the vernacular of these educational workers, 'were history'.

This is not an unusual view. And it contains a small grain of truth. Many workers will indeed speak of their union as a distant and ossified structure. But I argued with these teachers that if unions did often function in bureaucratic ways, they were hardly unduly powerful in their dealings with the employers and the state. On the contrary, they were weakened bodies, and had long been on the skids. They needed to be rebuilt, and in this rejuvenation their democratic promise and potential was necessarily going to be integral to the labour movement's revitalization.

Evidence of union decline is unambiguous. The percentage of the workforce organized in United States unions was roughly 33 per cent in 1945, had declined to 24 per cent by the end of the 1970s, and now stands at little more than ten per cent. Moreover, this union density is regionally skewed. Fully 4.4 million of the total 14.5 million union members in the United States live in two states, California and New York, a whopping 21 per cent. Try cracking a union in North Carolina or Arkansas. If we factor out public sector workers such as teachers and government employees, whose high union densities of 35 per cent are a product of 1960s organizational breakthroughs in these areas, the health of the trade union movement looks even worse. The precipitous decline of unions in the private sector – where the mass production labour gains of the 1930s and 1940s were registered – is astounding. Today, less than seven per cent of American workers who toil in these traditional blue collar occupations are

union members. Trade unionism is not exactly trending in the right direction.

"What will the United States look like without unions?" I asked Al's customers. I reminded them of what the labour movement had historically accomplished. Unions were vital forces in securing working people the basic entitlements that now mean so much to ordinary Americans: the eight-hour day; the weekend; a living wage; paid holiday time; some essential protection from arbitrary dismissal or humiliating denigration. As jaundiced as they had come to be about unions as they are in our times, the men I talked to outside of and then inside of Al's Breakfast knew this. They agreed that a United States without unions would be a country in which working people were acutely disadvantaged. Our dialogue seemed to move them out of their present discontents and uncovered more in the way of positive appreciations of the value of labour organization. These men knew, intuitively, that without the protections of trade unionism they and countless others were going to suffer.

What they did not know is the history of the Teamster insurgency in Minneapolis in 1934, arguably a key struggle that made so much of trade unionism's mid-century advance possible, not only in one city in one particularly difficult time, the years of the Great Depression, but in wider national circles. What happened in Minneapolis in 1934 helped galvanize workers to fight back.

It influenced national figures like United Mine Workers leader, John L. Lewis, to see that the moribund unionism of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), in which leaders like IBT strongman Daniel Tobin were ensconced, needed to be revitalized in what would come to be known as the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). The CIO mass production unionism that repudiated the narrow, craft-organized, business unionism of the AFL, threatened, for a brief time, to become a social mass production unionism that connected up with other fights for civil rights, women's rights, and various other social justice causes. Born of 'red' leaderships like those active in Minneapolis and elsewhere, and driven by rank-and-file militancy, this reinvigorated mass unionism put the movement back in labour's mobilizations.

Too often this process is seen as somehow a product of Lewis himself, and his ostensibly far-seeing vision of a new unionism. In fact, Lewis looked to Minneapolis. As one of his early biographers, Saul Alinsky, wrote in 1947, when "Blood ran in [the streets of] Minneapolis," it got the burly, idiosyncratic head of the miners' union to sit up and take notice.

## Commemorating Workers' Struggle: Remember 1934

I was in Minneapolis in mid-July because I had recently authored a book on these local strikes and their Trotskyist leadership: Revolutionary Teamsters: The Minneapolis Truckers' Strikes of 1934. Minneapolis has a dedicated crew of individuals who, on particular anniversaries, hold high the banner of these exemplary strikes. They call themselves the Remember 1934 committee. One of their current tasks is to raise funds for a plaque to be placed in the old Warehouse District where two workers, Teamster rank-and-file member Henry Ness and unemployed worker John Bellor, died in a viciously one-sided, strike-related battle with police on 'Bloody Friday', 20 July 1934. This being the 80th anniversary of the strikes, the 1934 committee and a number of Minneapolis unions organized an impressive series of events.

I was honored to participate in the proceedings, which included a public lecture on my book at the Central Library; a film night featuring video and newsreel clips from a number of 1934 strikes, including those of Minneapolis, sponsored by American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees Local 3800; a Teamsters Local 120 picnic and rally, with speakers like Minnesota's populist Senator, Al Franken; a march to where many of the pitched street battles of the 1934 conflict took place; the laying of a union wreath where an unarmed Henry Ness was viciously murdered by police; a six-hour street festival, involving hip-hop artists, street art exhibits, Aztec dancers, union and other speakers; a Sunday

picnic paying tribute to the descendants of the strikers, many of whom remain committed unionists, activists, and socialists; and a book launch and talk at a local institution of the left, MayDay Books, focusing on *Revolutionary Teamsters*.

These events heralded suggestions of fresh beginnings amidst recollections of old commitments. In the past, for instance, few descendants seemed to come forward and participate in efforts to Remember 1934. At this year's 80th anniversary celebrations, however, more relatives of the strikers came out of the woodwork. They recalled, often quite movingly, the ways their kinfolk's lives were forever altered by the experience of fighting to build unionism in Minneapolis.

Within Local 120, which has in the past eschewed a direct involvement in the Remember 1934 events, this is the first time that the official Teamsters union, as opposed to a reform current within it, Teamsters for a Democratic Union, has participated in the commemorations with unambiguous enthusiasm. In effect, 2014 marked a change in the IBT's willingness to 'own' its history. There was even mention of 'Trotskyist communist' leadership in one of the speeches at the Local 120 picnic.

Too much cannot be made of such developments. They may nonetheless suggest, as do a host of other happenings, from the Occupy movement to the protests in Wisconsin against state attacks on trade unionism to the victories around the $15 minimum wage in Seattle and elsewhere to the impressive recent fight of Chicago's teachers, that the anti-union tide that has threatened to engulf American labour is now meeting resistance.

## Dialectics of Possibility

The Teamsters' strikes of 1934 matter today because they remind us that, however bad the situation and whatever the power of those opposing change, victories can indeed be won.

One of the tangible hurdles that must be overcome if unions are to once again be remade as fighting agencies of the popular will is precisely the inertia and defeatism that suggests that they cannot, in the current climate, realize the potential that has always animated the labour movement. After all, unionism originated in and has long been inspired by the slogan, "An injury to one, is an injury to all." That brief admonition broadens understandings of what struggles can and should be about.

What is needed within unions and other social movements in our times is the kind of leadership that can, in the spirit of 1934, demand, as was often said in periods of upheaval like 1968, the seemingly impossible. But this

must be done in ways that understand what can be accomplished in a particular context. A balance must be struck between what might realistically be squeezed out of the actualities of the moment, without capitulating to the sorry ideological denials of possibility characteristic of any particular time.

This capacity to maximize what could be secured through struggle in 1934, rather than succumbing to the defeatism all around them, was what distinguished the revolutionary Trotskyists in the Minneapolis trucking industry from the IBT bureaucratic union officialdom.

If we compare the circumstances that a handful of these radicals faced in the coal yards of Minneapolis in the early 1930s, with what we confront today, it is impossible not to conclude that things looked worse, not better, in those Great Depression years. The working-class of Minneapolis won in 1934 because it had a leadership to guide it and a militant willingness to fight. This can happen again, not only in Minneapolis, but throughout the capitalist economies of our time, which are overripe for popular insurgencies.

## Unionism Today and the Denial of Possibility

Three claims are often currently made denying the possibility of union revival. It is instructive to look at these assertions and compare them to the situation Minneapolis militants faced in 1934:

• When the economy is in terrible shape, as it is now, the times prohibit overt class struggles and demand concessions and a holding back on demands.

• In the past, workers were able to build solidarity and collective ways of resisting because their circumstances were different than those prevailing today. Class may well have been a potent force for social change in earlier periods, but this is not the case now. People see their circumstances from the vantage point of individual rather than collective concerns. Mobilizations like that of Minneapolis in 1934 are now impossible.

• Unions are outmoded institutions. They are top-heavy with bureaucracy and are removed from their dues-paying memberships. Labour organizations thus have no relevance in progressive, contemporary social struggles.

A lot of this was on order at Al's Breakfast. But Trotskyists in Minneapolis answered these denials of possibility.

Their economic prospects, in 1933-1934, looked no better and probably a lot worse, than anything recent generations of workers have faced.

To be sure, the claims that workers today are less likely to struggle in class and collective ways than their counterparts in the past may seem self-evident. No doubt the fragmentation of working-class community life has increased over time, and the lure of consumer capitalism is more powerful now than it was decades ago. There are state institutions, like the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), that exercise a decisive and detrimental sway over labouring men and women in ways that were only weakly established in the 1930s. There is no doubt that the legalistic snare in which unions now seemed trapped is an impediment to class struggle mobilization.

Yet as the Minneapolis teamster leaders showed in their opposition to Franklin D. Roosevelt's original NLRB, the corps of mediators sent to defuse the volatile situation in Minneapolis, and the smooth talking Farmer-Labor Party state governor, Floyd Olson, it is possible to beat back the state's hegemonic hold over the working-class. The claims of conventional wisdoms suffocating popular insurgency's potent potential can be refused; the barriers erected against the active agency of workers by contemporary labour relations and their institutions of industrial legality can be transcended.

So, too, can the seemingly insuperable divisions of working-class life in the modern era. While racism and all manner of chauvinisms have existed throughout history and while they exercise their divisiveness within today's working-class, it is nevertheless the case that civil rights struggles, feminism, LGBTQ mobilizations, and other social movements, including trade unionism, have set the stage for a wider sense of human solidarity than has ever before been imaginable. Finally, precisely because capitalism has been in a state of crisis management since the mid-1970s, its capacity to lure the oppressed and exploited into its ideological lair has weakened considerably in recent times. Many people aren't 'buying' it anymore. For all of the problems inherent in the Occupy Movement, its slogan of 'Down with the 1%, Up with the 99%' articulated an undeniable and growing repudiation of capitalism's fundamental inequalities, highlighting the salience of class solidarity.

Finally, to those arguing that unions are bureaucratic beasts whose time has passed, the Minneapolis teamsters strikes of 1934 show precisely how an ossified officialdom can be swept aside in a moment of class upheaval. In the process, trade unionism can be revived.

There is also a second set of denials that also inhibit active change. They relate to the revolutionary left.

The primary lesson of Minneapolis is that the leadership that achieved the victory of 1934 came from this revolutionary left. There would have been no victories in Minneapolis in the mid-1930s if there had not been a Communist League of America leadership, established in New York, with a trade union fraction working diligently on the ground in a distant Minnesota city.

What these revolutionaries brought to trade unionism from outside of its experiences was decisively important. So, too, was the fact that these revolutionaries were embedded within the trucking industry and were well-known, and respected, among the workers of Minneapolis. The particularities of place mattered, but so too did general principles learned in various schools of hard knocks, and consolidated over the course of years of revolutionary thought and practice. When the situation exploded in all-out class war, the local leadership could rely on the advice, guidance, and skills of their 'party-like' formation and its comrades, as well as the support, resolve, energy, and militancy of rank-and-file workers in Minneapolis, both in the trucking sector and outside of it.

If we are to witness events the like of Minneapolis 1934 again, we obviously need, not only new unions, but a new, and revived, revolutionary left.

Yet the ideological commonsense of our current times proclaims the revolutionary left dead and buried. It does so in ways that are, again, usefully compared to the 1934 Minneapolis struggles:

• With the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989, capitalist commentators proclaimed 'the end of history'. This grandiose posture was premised on the view that with the implosion of actually existing socialism in its Stalinist variant, capitalism was triumphant, ending a contest pitting the free-world colossus (headed by the U.S. in the West) against the so-called totalitarian planned economies.

• Equating the entirety of the socialist project with Soviet Stalinism and its modern offshoots, from China to Cuba, this view of the 1945-1990 world concluded that a revolutionary challenge to capitalism had, finally, been vanquished. Capitalism's contest with socialism was declared decisively over.

• With the revolutionary left forever dispensed with, the politics of our times are confined to a new, and lesser, opposition. The only political contest involves progressive reform within capitalism, of the social democratic or liberal kind, versus the maintenance of a civil society prostrate before the hegemony of the market, or neoliberalism.

The Minneapolis truckers' insurgency and its leadership made it abundantly clear that Stalinism need not encompass the entirety of the revolutionary left. The Trotskyists who guided the 1934 teamster upheaval understood how the Communist Party of this era had abandoned its revolutionary origins and was on a slow, but inevitable, road to the implosion of 1989. They offered workers and their allies an alternative.

That alternative, moreover, kept the promise of revolutionary socialism alive precisely because it refused to collapse all struggle into the small, complacent, container of progressive, liberal, reform. A politics of the left that became nothing more than the attempt to insure that the lesser of many evils triumphed, necessitating the embrace of many pernicious illusions, was anathema to the revolutionary leadership of the Teamster rebellion. They would no more have regarded Minnesota's Farmer-Labor Governor Olson as an ally than should today's left look to someone far less radical, Barrack Obama, as anything approximating an answer to the untold grievances of the dispossessed.

If the Trotskyist teamsters were not fighting directly for Revolution in 1934, and they were not, their militant refusal to succumb to the many temptations on offer by those whose purpose it was to limit unionism to nothing more than an appendage to capitalism, built important bridges to

revolutionary possibility. And that is exactly why that revolutionary leadership and those bridges had to be attacked by bourgeois power and its props within the working-class, under the guise of World War II-fomented treason charges.

What the Minneapolis Trotskyists tell us is that principle and a vision of what can be achieved by militant actions and resolve, whatever the circumstances, do matter. They did not barter away their critical senses in a cat-and-mouse game of setting their sights on one main enemy and toying with ways of making their struggle more palatable to others, with whom they had fundamental disagreements. They fought employers and IBT bureaucrats; Stalinist slander and social democratic carrots of enticement; labour boards, courts, and mediators; the pulpit, police and provocateurs. This audacity goes a long way toward explaining just how they won, when so many other working-class struggles came up short.

Victories can be achieved, then, even in the worst of times. Even in our times. They will not, however, be secured by drinking the hemlock of conciliation, compromising everything in order to achieve a small, and always vulnerable, corner of what is needed. Reality must be faced squarely; capitulation can never be countenanced. We need to remember 1934 because, 80 years later, it still lives for us as a pathway to possibility.

## Dining Out as It Has Been and as It Might Be

Al's Breakfast has a long row of yellow ticket books. They are thrown into rectangular alphabetically-ordered bins that run much of the length of the narrow service area in which cooks and servers scurry back and forth. Each booklet has a name boldly marked on its outside.

I asked the waitress what they were. "Prepaid breakfasts," she replied, barely stopping to answer as she walked off briskly to pick-up and drop off another order. Apparently the practice began in the 1950s: railroad workers, paid once a month, would deposit a portion of their wages with Al so they would be assured of eating at the end of the month when their cash reserves would likely be low. Not quite "From each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs." But something.

In 1934, when they were on strike, teamsters dined at their massive union hall. This was a place that proclaimed the collective power of the working-class. More than a building, it was an edifice that represented a way of life. Workers' meals were not prepaid, at least not in terms of the cash that oils the wheels of the marketplace. Rather, it was the collective being

of class mobilization that literally put food on the workers' communal tables in 1934, and that ordered concerns of health and well-being. Sustenance in the midst of struggle was provided by the General Drivers' Union. Local 574's commissary was staffed by women's auxiliary members; its hospital was run by volunteer doctors and nurses.

Discussions took place about how to maximize nutrition in the meals served, which were prepared by strike supporters, many of the ingredients provided by local farmers who sided with the workers in their battles.

After a full day of picket duty, a striking worker might well have sat down to a plate of roast chicken, mashed potatoes, and fresh vegetables. This was likely to be followed by conversation and discussion with fellow unionists, perhaps even an address by one of the strike leaders or a report from the Strike Committee of 100. To cap off the evening, this worker likely took time to do a reading of the day's issue of *The Organizer*. Food for thought. •

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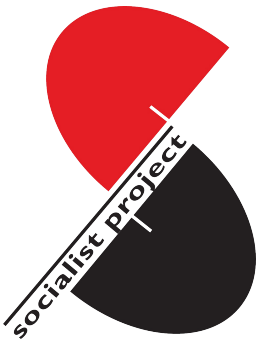


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