

May Day DC 2012 – Historic Interludes

A historical narration of the meaning of the day told through readings between acts.

Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, 1944

(1890–1964) A labor leader, activist, and feminist who played a leading role in the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). Flynn was a founding member of the American Civil Liberties Union and a visible proponent of women's rights, birth control, and women's suffrage. She joined the American Communist Party in 1936 and late in life, in 1961, became its chairwoman.

May First, the sun of tomorrow! It links ancient traditions, these modern times, and the future. Always a people's natural holiday, since time immemorial it was the occasion for the gathering of the of the poor and lowly for one gala day of festivity. [And now] it has been universally recognized and cherished by workers around the world as an International Labor Holiday. . . It makes sharp and clear, around the world, the impassable chasm between all workers and all exploiters. It is the day when the class struggle in its most militant significance is reaffirmed by every conscious worker.

May Day as an official labor holiday was born in the fierce struggles of the [eighteen]-eighties to establish an eight-hour day. Workers of all nationalities, immigrants, political refugees, exiles, from every foreign land; native born grandsons of the American Revolution and Civil War veterans made a common, determined demand: "Eight hours shall constitute a legal day's work from and after May First, 1886." . . . Enthusiastic, they poured out in the first American general strike. It spread from city to city, over 3,000 miles. The whole continent, from the Atlantic to the Pacific, was astir: 192,000 won the demand. The employing class, appalled at the solidarity of the workers, struck back viciously. Six workers were killed and many wounded at the McCormick Harvester Works in Chicago.

May Day was baptized in the blood of American workers. A protest meeting Haymarket Square May 4, 1886, resulted in another bloody battle and a bomb frame-up. It caused the railroading to the gallows of Albert Parsons . . . and three of his comrades, Engel, Fischer, and Spies. "Let the voice of the people be heard!" cried Parsons, as the noose tightened around his neck . . . This day is to the enlightened worker an augury of a new world, a classless world, a peaceful world, a world without poverty or misery.

August Spies, 1886

(1855–1887) A German-born American newspaper editor and radical labor activist. Spies is remembered as one of the anarchist leaders in Chicago who were found guilty of conspiracy to commit murder following a bomb attack on police in an event remembered as the Haymarket affair. Spies was one of four who were executed in the aftermath of this event.

Anarchism is on trial! If that is the case your honor, very well; you may sentence me, for I am an anarchist. I believe that the state of castes and classes--the state where one class dominates over and lives upon the labor of another class, and calls this order--yes, I believe that this barbaric form of social organization, with its legalized plunder and murder, is doomed to die and make room for a free society, voluntary association, or universal brotherhood, if you like. You may pronounce the sentence upon me, honorable judge, but let the world know that in A.D. 1886, in the state of Illinois, eight men were sentenced to death because they believed in a better future; because they had not lost their faith in the ultimate victory of liberty and justice!...

The time will come when our silence will be more powerful than the voices you strangle today!

“Resolution,” International Socialist Conference, 1904

The International Socialist Congress, Amsterdam 1904 was the Sixth Congress of the Second International, an organization of socialist and labour parties that existed from 1889-1916.

The International Socialist Congress in Amsterdam calls upon all Social-Democratic Party organizations and trade unions of all countries to demonstrate energetically on May First for the legal establishment of the 8-hour day, for the class demands of the proletariat, and for universal peace. The most effective way of demonstrating on May First is by stoppage of work. The Congress therefore makes it mandatory upon the proletarian organizations of all countries to stop work on May First, wherever it is possible without injury to the workers.

Guido Baracchi, May 1921

(1887-1975) A founder of the Australian Communist Party (CPA) in 1920, and for many years was considered its leading theoretician. He worked for the communist movement in the Berlin of the Weimar Republic, and in Moscow in the 1930s. He was twice expelled from the Communist Party, and from 1940 to the 1960s was a member of the small Australian Trotskyist group.

“Proletarian Comment”

IN 1889 the International Congress of Paris adopted May 1 as the International Socialist holiday, and each succeeding year, in every civilised country, workingmen and women demonstrated on that day to demand from a capitalist world greater political and industrial freedom and better conditions of livelihood. It was conceived particularly as an international demand for an 8-hour day, for social legislation, for equal suffrage for men and women, and as a protest against militarism and war. In most countries May Day was celebrated as a workers' holiday. On this day the class conscious working men and women asserted, if only for a day, their freedom from capitalist domination. And by this token it signified to them the great international brotherhood of the working-class, fighting for liberation from capitalist oppression.

Martha H. Foley

(Unknown) A militant suffragist and socialist who was arrested, convicted on perjured testimony, and sentenced to eighteen months imprisonment for her involvement with one of the May Day riots in 1919.

"Red May Day in Prison," 1919

It is May Day [1919]. The sun is shining in a clean blue sky, leaves and grass of young, vivid green stir in the warm breeze, the call of spring is in the air and one thrills to its challenge. A new world is in birth.

A joyous, living crowd fills to overflowing the Dudley Street Opera House. They are there to celebrate that most significant of all holidays--International Labor Day . . . and this year its significance has been increased a thousand fold. In Russia the workers have won; they are winning in Germany, in Hungary, in Austria: gaining all over Europe and awakening in America. Everyone in the hall wears a bit of red, a token of the red blood that courses through the veins of all men alike, of all races . . . There are speeches received with enthusiastic applause and singing. Tears come to my eyes as I listen to the many languages blending into the "International," and I hear the cry coming down through the ages of peoples pitted against people, slaying one another that the masters might fatten on their blood.

. . . We are all happy, we are all wishing that everyone else should be happy, but--trouble is brewing.

On the opposite side of the street a rapidly increasing gang of hoodlums is following us threateningly . . . Soon patrol wagons dash past, turn and block the street. From it descend police with clubs drawn. Without ado they strike right and left among the body of marchers. Men fall to the ground, stunned by the blows. The crowd of non-Socialists surge over toward us and strives to outdo the police in brutality. They are armed with large pieces of timber, with lead-pipe and heavy wire. Men prostrate on the street are kicked and beaten mercilessly. Women are attacked and children trampled upon.

A man carrying a club approaches an officer near me and complains that his crowd is not large enough to kill off the "damn Bolsheviks." The officer advises him to get together all his crowd, as they are to scattered. Amazed, I remonstrate with the officer for encouraging the mob to violence. "Oh, go to hell!" is the answer. I report him to the sergeant in charge, who asks me if I am with those foreigners. To his "You ought to be proud of your associates," I retort: "I am, thank God, I am!"

Alfred Hayes, 1934

(1911–1985) A British screenwriter, television writer, novelist, and poet, who worked in Italy and the United States. He is perhaps best known for his poem "Joe Hill," later set to music by Earl Robinson.

“Into the Streets May First”

Into the streets May First!
Into the roaring Square!
Shake the midtown towers!
Shatter the downtown air!
Come with a storm of banners,
Come with an earthquake tread,
Bells, hurl out of your belfries,
Red flag, leap out your red!
Out of the shops and factories,
Up with the sickle and hammer,
Comrades, these are our tools,
A song and a banner!
Roll song, from the sea of our hearts,
Banner, leap and be free;
Song and banner together,
Down with the bourgeoisie!
Sweep the big city, march forward,
The day is a barricade;
We hurl the bright bomb of the sun,
The moon like a hand grenade.
Pour forth like a second flood!
Thunder the alps of the air!
Subways are roaring our millions—
Comrades, into the square!

Excerpt from the *May Day Tactical Handbook* by the May Day Collective, 1971

In 1971 over 200,000 anti-war activists staged a several-day long series of civil disobedience actions in Washington, DC protesting the Vietnam War. The demonstrations were spearheaded by an affinity group called the May Day Tribe, largely comprised of "yippies," which included members of the Chicago Seven. The protests began with a large, festive gathering and encampment and aimed to shut down the city through large-scale demonstrations. The actions went by the tagline, "If the government won't stop the war, we will stop the government." Ultimately, 13,500 were arrested by a force of 14,000 police and National Guardsmen.

This Ann Arbor Student and Youth Conference on a People's Peace decided to organize Mayday on a regional decentralized basis. This means no "National Organizers." You do the organizing. This means no movement generals" making tactical decisions you have to carry out. Your region makes the tactical decisions within the discipline of nonviolent civil disobedience

In brief, the aim of the MayDay actions is to raise the social cost of war to the level of unacceptable to American rulers. To do this we seek to create a specter of social chaos . . . we [will] engage in disruptive actions in major government centers, primarily Washington DC . . . The objective is to close down the Federal government sections . . . by blocking arteries during the early morning rush hours.

Saturday, May 1st

Most Mayday participants will arrive on May 1st. People will be coming in by chartered bus, car caravans, and long walks. The morning will be devoted to the May 1st arrivals setting up camp in their regional villages and getting to know the land. In the early afternoon the celebration will begin. The Celebration with rock bands, and dancing, and singing and smoking in the fields will last late into the night. Bring along bamboo flutes, drums, guitars and tambourines, and the woods will be filled with people's music.

Sunday, May 2nd

We'll sleep in late. . . At the Sylvan Theatre we'll join SCLC, National Welfare Rights Organization and the United Farmworkers Organizing Committee in a rally calling for an end to the war against American Poor People.

Monday/Tuesday, May 3rd-4th

The People of the Algonquin Peace City will disperse regional groups to their target areas for Nonviolent Civil Disobedience.

Wednesday, May 5th

All across the country, on May 5, people respond to the call for "No Business as Usual" in a massive people's strike Against the War. At Algonquin Peace City the people not arrested on Monday and Tuesday take camping gear and food and more camp to the Capitol Building where we lay nonviolent siege demanding congress

ratify the People's Peace Treaty. . . We'll stay at our siege encampment until the treaty is ratified or all are arrested.

Mr. Toad - Automaker, 1980

Unknown Buick automaker from Detroit, who attended a socialist May Day Picnic in 1980.

The eight-hour day is not enough;
We are thinking of more and better stuff.
So here is our prayer and here is our plan,
We want what we want and we'll take what we can.

Down with wars both small and large,
Except for the ones where we're in charge:
Those are the wars of class against class,
Where we get a chance to kick some ass..

For air to breathe and water to drink,
And no more poison from the kitchen sink.
For land that's green and life that's saved
And less and less of the earth that's paved.

No more women who are less than free,
Or men who cannot learn to see
Their power steals their humanity
And makes us all less than we can be.

For teachers who learn and students who teach
And schools that are kept beyond the reach
Of provosts and deans and chancellors and such
And Xerox and Kodak and Shell, Royal Dutch.

An end to shops that are dark and dingy,
An end to Bosses whether good or stingy,
An end to work that produces junk,
An end to junk that produces work,
And an end to all in charge - the jerks.

For all who dance and sing, loud cheers,
To the prophets of doom we send some jeers,
To our friends and lovers we give free beers,
And to all who are here, a day without fears.

So, on this first of May we all should say
That we will either make it or break it.
Or, to put this thought another way,
Let's take it easy, but let's take it.

“March 25 Coalition Statement,” 2006

Coalition that organized the March 25, 2006 rally in Los Angeles and helped organize the nationwide Great American Boycott of May 1, 2006 to raise awareness on the struggle for immigrant rights in America. Members included ANSWER and the L.A. chapter of the National Lawyers Guild.

“We call for Amnesty & Full Legalization”

The massive March 25 demonstration in Los Angeles of well over one million undocumented workers, legal residents and their supporters—along with protests and walkouts throughout the United States—is irrefutable evidence that a new Civil Rights and workers’ rights movement is on the rise.

On the lips of every marcher, representing millions more, was the demand for equality and the rights that all working people should enjoy.

Those rights cannot be realized with anything less than a comprehensive, all-encompassing process of full legalization for all immigrants.

The schemes being debated in Congress only aim to either criminalize the undocumented and by extension all immigrants, or to provide an extremely limited possibility for undocumented workers to be able to live, work and remain in the country they have adopted as their own.

The immigrants’ rights movement cannot be satisfied to accept “guest worker” or other repressive schemes from Congress or Bush. Some say that amnesty and legalization are not realistic, and that it is even dangerous to raise the demand for full equality.

The lessons of history in the United States provide us with great examples of how the perseverance of a people’s movement is the only way to overcome brutal discrimination and achieve full rights.

Let us remember the 1955-56 Montgomery, Alabama boycott of the heroic African American people in that city. It was the people, the domestic and hotel maids, gardeners, cooks, seamstresses and the whole community, who said, “enough is enough.” They demanded nothing less than full equality. By their persistence they were victorious and made history.

Today this new Civil and workers’ rights movement demands amnesty, legalization and full equality.