

SOCIALIST RENEWAL

STRUGGLE

# MAY DAY

CELEBRATION



John Gorman

SOLIDARITY

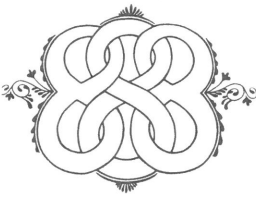
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# MAY DAY

Solidarity, celebration, struggle

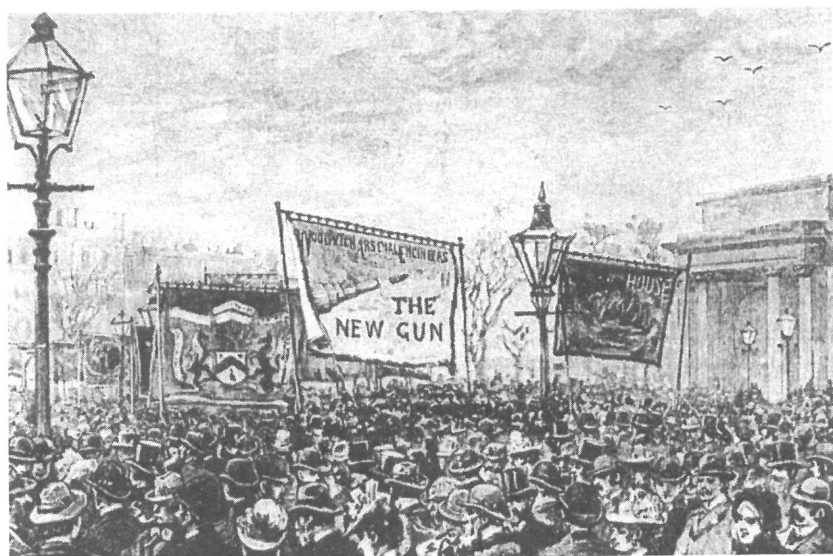


The streets were ablaze with colour as banners were raised on high, swaying above the heads of the marchers, the tramp and shuffle of feet, animated chatter and the rasp of brass bands filled the air. It seemed that the whole of organised labour in London was on the move, countless thousands treading the cobbles beneath a rain-threatening spring sky. Contingents had assembled at noon and set off from thirty fixed marshalling points, from Dartford in the south-east to Kew Bridge in the north-west. From St Pancras, Newington Green, Stratford Broadway, Wandsworth Marsh, Battersea Park Road, Rotherhithe, Peckham, Kensal Green, and Fulham they came, collecting assembled groups of workers along the route to Hyde Park. On the Embankment, between Blackfriars and Westminster, the London Trades Council organised ninety trade unions into a massive procession. The Horse Hair and Fibre Workers' Union, London Carmen's Trade Union, Spitalfields Market Porters' Union, Umbrella Makers and Mounters' Union, Omnibus and Tram Union, Stick and Cane Dressers' Society, United Cap Makers' Society, Hebrew Cabinet Makers' Society, Navvies' Union, Barge Builders, Ropemakers, Coal Porters, Carpenters, Printers, Boxmakers, Fancy Leather Workers, Skinners, Curriers, Tanners and Trunkmakers, all lined up with dozens of other unions, and every section was headed by its banner. The marchers were assembled by the 'Chief Marshal', Tom Mann, who according to George Lansbury 'was a sight for the Gods . . . tearing about the embankment in a coster's cart giving orders like a Field Marshal.' When they moved off to the sound of the *Marseillaise*, thousands of onlookers lining the route joined the slow-moving procession. Red flags, poles topped with caps of liberty, makeshift flags and the huge red, green and gold silk banners of the trade unions bobbed and waved throughout the meandering ranks, a spectacle of vibrant colour.

Trades Councils, the Social Democratic Federation, Radical Clubs, The

Fabian Society, The Bloomsbury Socialist Society, the old craft unions and the new unions of the so-called unskilled, from every quarter they converged on London's West End, the socialists distributing a flurry of leaflets as they went. From the East End came the shock troops of the eight hours movement, the Gasworkers' whose banner depicted the manner in which the men worked in the heat of the retort houses, the design surmounted by the illustration of a clock, its hands set at eight to mark the eight hour day won during their pioneering strike in 1889. The gasworkers marched as a militant battalion, carrying their shovels and heavy hammers, eyed suspiciously by the police. Eight hundred postmen marched with the 'greatest regularity', their banner declaring 'Each for all and all for each'. Men from the West End shops appeared in 'tall hats and black frock coats with fresh flower in buttonhole', behind them, headed by a banner of the Ladies Tailors' Union came a 'tatterdemalion crew of sweated men from the East End.' From the slums of Limehouse, Wapping and Stepney came the dockers, 'an interminable array with multitudinous banners' carrying in the fore their original colour from the Great Dock Strike, still spattered with the mud of a hundred dock gate meetings, followed by a plain banner emblazoned with the words, 'Union and Victory'. Women, ropemakers and matchmakers, wearing huge feathers 'advanced like a moving rainbow', contrasting with hundreds of 'gentlemen compositors', kid-gloved and top hatted. Every so often, interspersed with the men in working clothes, the ragged and the sweated, strode the solid craft-skilled trade unionists, aristocrats of labour, proud and assured, with bowler hats, heavy watch-chains and a determined tread, Stonemasons, Watermen and Lightermen, Engineers, and the Carpenters and Joiners. Leading one section of the procession were twenty-five United Farriers, 'right gallantly mounted on sprightly steeds, the riders wearing blue and white sashes and smoking cigars.' They were escorted by two outriders, one of whom wore a green coat and phrygian cap, the other a red Garibaldi jacket.

From the south, marched girl envelope-makers who were on strike and women from the jam and confectionery factories of Bermondsey. Prominent were the engineers from Woolwich Arsenal on whose banner was painted a 'new gun' firing an eight hours shot in the direction of the Houses of Parliament. Throughout the miles-long column were groups of navvies, builders' labourers, casual workers, and the outdoor poor. If step and dress were often ragged, it was no rabble but a confident army of working men and women who took to the streets that day. It was May Day, 1890, the first International Labour Day, and they marched to celebrate the solidarity of labour and to demand the eight hour working day.



London, 1890

In Hyde Park, fifteen platforms were set up in two huge semi-circles of wagons from which one hundred speakers addressed the multitude in relays. For hours the surging mass of workers poured into the park, dividing into three main groups: those organised by the Central Committee for the Eight Hours Legal Working Day, trade unionists rallied by the London Trades Council, and the followers of the Social Democratic Federation. The list of speakers that day reads like a roll-call of pioneers of organised labour; John Burns, Tom Mann, Ben Tillett, Will Thorne, Annie Besant, George Lansbury, Pete Curran, Herbert Burrows, Henry Mayers Hyndman, Bernard Shaw, Michael Davitt, Eleanor Marx, and Edward Aveling among them. Fraternal speakers included Stepniak and Paul Lafargue. It was impossible to number the assembled crowd, Davitt claimed 500,000, Hyndman went even higher, the *Daily Telegraph* reported the figure as 200,000, *The Times* said it was 'colossal', but few sources dispute the figure of at least three hundred thousand. Engels hailed the demonstration as the largest since the days of the Chartists and said that on that historic May Day he had heard, 'for the first time in forty years, the unmistakable voice of the English proletariat.'

By five o'clock, when the bugles sounded for the resolutions to be put to the great assembly, thousands were still entering the park. The resolutions put by the Central Committee and the Social Democratic Federation called for



legislation to enshrine the eight hour day by law, the SDF adding a rider pledging itself to 'work steadily for the collective ownership of all the means and instruments of producing wealth by the whole community as the only method of completely emancipating the people from the industrial slavery of today.' The London Trades Council resolution called

for a forty-eight hour week and urged the government and local authorities to give a lead by introducing the eight hour day for those in their employment, demanding that no Bill for public works be passed unless such a Bill contained a clause limiting the hours of labour on such work to eight hours a day. This was put to the meeting by George Shipton, Secretary of the LTC, resplendent in 'frock coat, silk hat and gold laced collar.'

The origins of May Day as International Labour Day are to be traced to the struggle for shorter working hours. In many of the industrialised countries in the latter part of the 19th century, workers toiled for up to sixteen hours a day, seven days a week. The call for the 'Three Eights' — eight hours work, eight hours leisure and eight hours sleep — was raised repeatedly by the International Workingmen's Association, the First International, founded in London in 1864. At its first Congress, held in Geneva in 1866, a resolution on the limitation of working hours included the words, 'The Congress proposes eight hours work as the limit of the working day.' In the United States, where the first fruit of the Civil War was the eight hours agitation, the general convention of the National Labor Union at Baltimore in 1866, representative of some sixty trade unions, declared, 'The first and great necessity of the present, to free the labor of this country from capitalist slavery, is the passing of a law by which eight hours shall be the normal working day in all States of the American Union'. Some of the States in the USA had already legislated for the eight hour day for federal employees in 1866, but for the majority there was no legal limit to the working day.

In Australia, the eight hours campaign began in Sydney in 1855, with the passing of a resolution by the Stonemasons' Society, 'That in the opinion of this Society eight hours should be the maximum day's work.' Employers were advised that from that day, six months hence, masons would only work an eight hour day. The men working on two jobs, the building of the Holy Trinity Church and the Mariners' Church, both in Sydney, did not wait for the ultimatum to expire. They went on strike, won, and celebrated with a victory dinner on 1 October 1855. They were fortunate that the demand for building was heavy, and the number of skilled masons few. The carpenters and joiners



Denmark, 1895



called a general strike for the eight hour day in 1857, but they were unsuccessful. Although Australia was in the vanguard of the fight for the eight hour day, it did not spread like a bushfire, but smouldered for half a century.

In Great Britain, despite the Ten Hours Act of 1844 which restricted the hours of labour by women and children in some trades, the length of the working day was dictated by unscrupulous employers. At the first great May Day rally in Hyde Park, speaker after speaker recounted horrific stories of long hours for low wages, railwaymen working thirteen hours a day for seventeen shillings a week, shop assistants working seventy hours a week, children and women sweated till exhaustion. John Ward, a navy and a socialist Parliamentary candidate for Wandsworth, told of 'women and girls in the East End whose thin fingers wove the silks of the fine ladies who paraded in their carriages in Rotten Row, working eighteen hours a day for a few shillings to keep body and soul together.'

However, it was from America that the agitation for the eight hour day was to lead directly to the birth of the 1 May as a day of celebration and struggle by international labour. From the great strikes of 1877, when tens of thousands of striking railroad workers and steelworkers fought great corporations, only to be savagely repressed by troops and company police, American workers waged unrelenting campaigns for trade unionism and the shorter working day.

The decade, 1880-1890, was a boom period for the expansion of American industry, capital investment soared, the number of factory workers doubled and more than five million immigrants arrived to seek work and a better life. It was also a decade that saw another capitalist cyclical depression in trade, peaking in 1884, with resulting widespread unemployment and consequent hardship for millions. The Federation of Organised Trades and Labor Unions of the United States and Canada, later to be known by the shorter title of the American Federation of Labor, used the issue of unemployment to popularise the slogan of the eight hour day as a rallying call to build trade unionism. At its Fourth Convention in October, 1884, the following resolution was passed: 'That eight hours shall constitute a legal day's labor from May 1st, 1886, and that we shall recommend to labor organisations throughout their jurisdiction that they so direct their laws to conform to this resolution by the time named.'

The Federation appealed to the Knights of Labor, an older trade union body, to join them in calling for united action to win the eight hour day, a proposal which won acceptance. At its convention in 1885, the American Federation of Labor reiterated its resolution on the eight hour day and called

for a walk out on the first of May the following year to enforce the demand, and a number of national unions immediately took action to prepare for the strike, notably the carpenters and cigarmakers. While the Knights of Labor endorsed the call for the eight hour day, its leadership favoured legislation as a means of achievement. Not so the rank and file who readily embraced the call for a national stoppage. Eight hour day leagues were formed and local strikes for the shorter working day were successful in a number of major cities. During the year with continued agitation for a national eight hours day strike, union membership increased, the Knights of Labor, the better known of the two organisations, increasing its numbers by almost half a million.

In Chicago, a militant centre of the movement, a united eight hour association was formed which included the American Federation of Labor, the Knights of Labor and the Socialist Labor Party, the first organised socialist political party of the American working class. Another major force was the anarcho-syndicalists, whose role in the coming struggle was to be pivotal. As the day approached excitement mounted as thousands took up the cause. Loyal trade unionists wore 'eight hour shoes', smoked 'eight hour tobacco' and sang an 'eight hour song':

We mean to take things over;  
we're tired of toil for naught,  
But bare enough to live on;  
never an hour for thought.  
We want to feel the sunshine;  
we want to smell the flowers;  
We're sure that God has willed it,  
and we mean to have eight hours.  
We're summoning our forces  
from shipyard, shop and mill:  
Eight hours for work, eight hours  
for rest, eight hours for what we will.

The mood on 1 May 1886 in Chicago was one of elation. Employers had already granted the eight hour day to 450,000 workers in the city, and across the nation more than 300,000 downed tools, a quarter of them in Chicago. As workers and their families waited for the parade, there was an air of solidarity and celebration. The authorities, however, did not regard the demonstration as festive. The *Chicago Mail*, in an editorial that morning, gave a warning, 'There are two dangerous ruffians at large in this city, two skulking cowards who are trying to create trouble. One of them is named Parsons, the other is named Spies . . . Mark them for today. Make an example



of them if trouble does occur.' Albert Parsons and August Spies were anarchists, well known and popular with Chicago workers. On 25 April, at an outdoor meeting called by the unions, 25,000 had heard Parsons and Spies speak in favour of a shorter working day. On 1 May, as the marchers moved off in bright sunshine, Parsons, his wife and two children were in the front row, but deployed on the rooftops overlooking the route were militiamen with rifles, supported by Pinkerton agents. In reserve at the city's armouries were 1,300 National Guardsman waiting to be called.

In the event, the march and rally, which was addressed by speakers in English, Polish and German, passed off peaceably and the workers dispersed to enjoy the rest of the day. On succeeding days, strikes for the eight hour day continued, with building sites, foundries and docks silent. With some of the railyards shut over another issue, more than 65,000 were walking the picket lines. Among those already on strike were 1,400 workers of the McCormick Harvester works, locked-out since mid-February. A few hundred yards away, on strike for the eight hour day, were 6,000 lumber shovers being addressed by August Spies. While Spies was speaking to them, the shift at McCormick's changed and some of the lumber workers drifted towards the works to help the pickets heckle the scabs. Within minutes the police, there to protect the blacklegs, attacked the trade unionists with clubs and guns, scattering the pickets. Hearing the gunfire, Spies and many others from his audience rushed to the scene, to be greeted with more clubbing and firing. Six workers were left dead or dying and many more wounded.

August Spies went to the printing shop of the anarchist paper, *Arbeiter-Zeitung*, of which he was editor, where he drafted a fiery leaflet filled with the passion and hatred of the moment. Printed in English and German, it began, 'Workingmen, to Arms!!!, The masters sent out their bloodhounds — the police; they killed six of your brothers at McCormick's this afternoon. They killed the poor wretches because they, like you, had the courage to disobey the supreme will of your bosses.' The leaflet ended with the call, 'To arms, we call you to arms.' It was signed, 'Your brothers.' An enthusiastic typesetter added the word 'Revenge' in large type to the heading of the leaflet. The next morning, realising the danger of provocation, Spies ordered the printing of a second leaflet, omitting the call to arms, but it was too late to recall all of the original leaflets, some of which had already been distributed.

The evening protest meeting at the Haymarket attracted a crowd of some 3,000, who listened to speeches from a number of speakers. including Spies and Parsons. The protesters were orderly and unarmed, the meeting peaceable. By ten o'clock it had begun to break up, partly due to the lateness



1° Maggio 1901

Italy, 1901

of the hour, and partly because it was a bitterly cold evening and it had started to rain. As the crowd was drifting away, a police captain, John Bonfield, known to working men as 'clubber', arrived with one hundred and eighty police and ordered the meeting to end. At that moment, a bomb was thrown into the police ranks, the shattering explosion killing and wounding a number of them. The police responded with wild clubbing and shooting, killing some of their own officers in the *mêlée*. Eight anarchist leaders were subsequently arrested and charged with conspiracy to murder, the call to arms leaflet used as damning evidence. The bomb-thrower was never identified and the arrested were innocent of the crime, but in an atmosphere of anti-trade union hysteria they were found guilty and four were hanged, including Parsons and Spies. The hanged and the imprisoned were to become known in American labour history as the 'Chicago martyrs'.

In December 1888, the American Federation of Labour decided that they would make a mass demonstration on 1 May, 1890. It was to prove to be an historic decision. In Europe, the idea of a single day of action was gaining favour among trade unionists. In 1887, the Trades Union Congress at Swansea had voted in favour of an international conference to urge the claims of the eight hour day. The Congress of the French Trade Union Federation held at Bouscat in 1888, proposed that on 10 February the following year, 'all unions should make representation to the local authorities for an eight hour day and for a minimum wage.' In April, 1889, the Swedish Social Democratic Workers' Party decided that 'workers organisations in Sweden should demonstrate on the same day throughout the country, to make the ruling class recognise as soon as possible the natural and civil rights of the working class.' The Belgian Workers' Party in May 1889 discussed a proposal to set a date for a one-day strike in support of the eight hour day. At the founding of the Miners' International Federation in June the same year, Keir Hardie proposed a miners' strike for 1 May 1891 in support of the eight hour day.

It was in Paris, 1889, the centenary year of the French Revolution, that a congress of socialists and trade unionists from many lands met on 14 July — the anniversary of the fall of the Bastille — to discuss the forming of a new international body of working class organisations. It was to become known eventually as the Second International, the First International having effectively collapsed following a schism between the marxists and anarchists at the Hague Congress in 1872. At the end of the 1889 Congress, J F Busche, the delegate of the Socialist Labor Party of the United States proposed that the Congress should fix a date for an annual demonstration for the reduction of working hours. Several dates were mentioned, but as the AFL had already

designated 1 May as a date for their national demonstration, it was agreed that 1 May should be nominated as the international date. Raymond Lavigne, a French socialist, introduced the following resolution:

The Congress decides to organise a great international demonstration, so that in all countries and in all cities on one appointed day the toiling masses shall demand of the state authorities the legal reduction of the working day to eight hours, as well as carrying out the other decisions of the Paris Congress. Since a similar demonstration has already been decided upon for May 1, 1890, by the American Federation of Labor at its convention in St Louis, December 1888, this day is accepted for the international demonstration. The workers of the various countries must organise this demonstration according to the conditions prevailing in each country.

The call was answered with an international display of solidarity. There were strikes and demonstrations in Switzerland, Romania, Belgium, Italy, Poland, Sweden, Norway and Denmark. In Italy thousands of demonstrators clashed with the police and the army. 100,000 marched under red flags in Barcelona, and in Madrid 20,000 were addressed by Pablo Iglesias, the founder of the Socialist Workers' Party. Despite anti-socialist laws in Germany, there were demonstrations in many industrial towns with a large number of workers striking. In Austro-Hungary there were barricades in Vienna and demonstrations in Prague and Budapest, while in Czarist Russia there were illegal meetings. The cigar-workers in Cuba, still a Spanish colony, went on strike.

In Britain, apart from the huge London processions and great meeting in Hyde Park, May Day was marked in many towns and cities. Led by a temperance band, 10,000 marched in Northampton, including 2,000 agricultural labourers, while rallies attracted thousands in Plymouth, Birmingham, Glasgow and Dublin. Workers in the United States turned out in large numbers, 20,000 attending a socialist meeting in New York's Union Square, and there were mass demonstrations in many other cities, the largest being in Chicago where striking carpenters led a march of 35,000. The first labour May Day was a striking witness to the power and solidarity of the international organised working class.



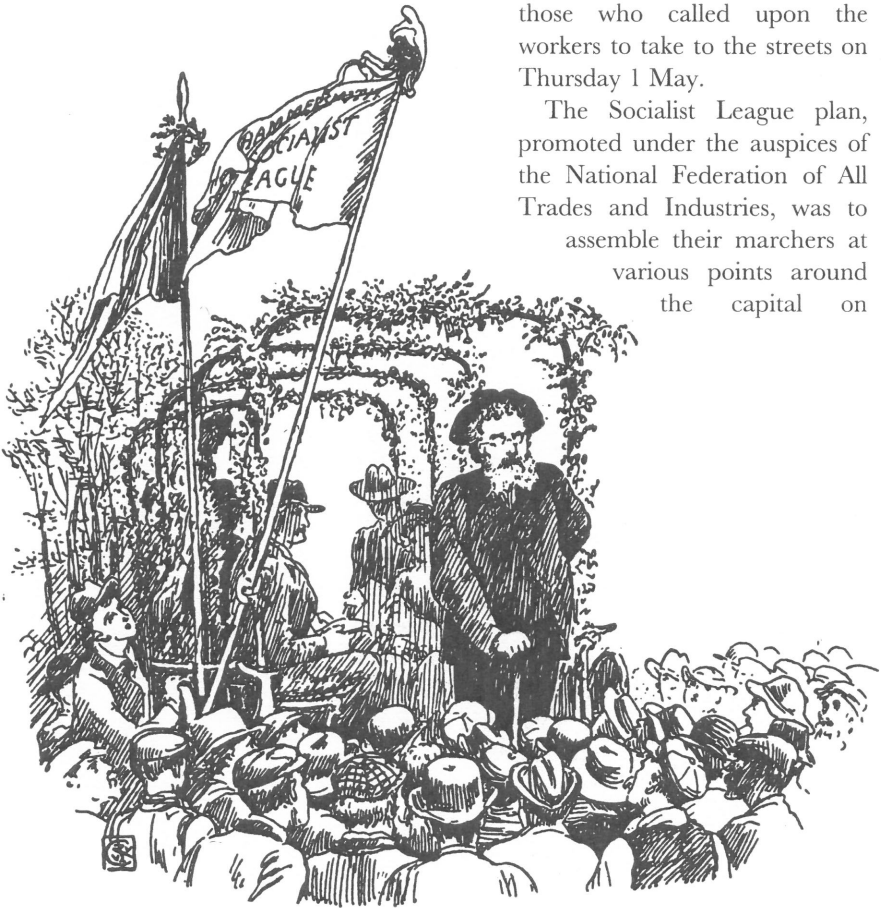
Yet there was a division, between those who supported the holding of international labour day on 1 May, and those who argued for the celebration on the first Sunday in May. Among the British

delegates at the first Congress were William Morris and Henry Mayers Hyndman. Morris supported those who called for the workers to demonstrate on 1 May, even when that meant coming out on strike. Hyndman supported the call for demonstrations on the first Sunday in May.

So, on that first international labour May Day, Hyndman led the Social Democratic Federation in support of the Central Committee for the Eight Hours Legal Day — under the leadership of Eleanor Marx and Edward Aveling — and the London Trades Council, which pragmatically marched on the Sunday 4 May. William Morris and the Socialist League supported

those who called upon the workers to take to the streets on Thursday 1 May.

The Socialist League plan, promoted under the auspices of the National Federation of All Trades and Industries, was to assemble their marchers at various points around the capital on



*Walter Crane's drawing of William Morris, May Day, 1894*

Thursday, 1 May, and to converge on Hyde Park for a mass meeting. However, the Metropolitan and City Police Commissioners acted to ban the march through areas of trade and confined the demonstration to the main thoroughfares from the Victoria Embankment to Hyde Park. The mid-week marchers numbered not more than 2,000 and could hardly be said to have represented 'all trades', as the only trade union banners to be mentioned in *Commonweal*, the official journal of the Socialist League, were those of the Painters and Decorators, the Firewood Cutters and the South Side Labour Protection League. Nevertheless, they did not lack either spirit or conviction and led by a banner proclaiming 'Workers of the world, Unite!' in English, French and German, the mixed band of socialists and trade unionists made their way to the Reformers' Tree, joined by ragged men from the casual wards and a sprinkling of anarchists. They marched to the accompaniment of a band playing revolutionary tunes, the bandsmen wearing red caps of liberty. The journey was uneventful, and in the park, the resolution of the Socialist League was carried at two platforms without dissent: 'That this meeting hails with joy the awakening of labour which is taking place throughout the civilised world; declares the necessity for the union of workers in all countries to obtain complete freedom from the monopoly of capitalists; asserts that the only possible remedy is the free access to the resources of nature, and the management by the workers of the organisation of labour; calls upon all workers to accept the task of bringing about this freedom as a necessary duty paramount over all others.'

The crowd dwindled quietly away, some to make their way to an evening torchlight meeting on Clerkenwell Green. There, England's first labour May Day came noisily to a close, the speeches being drowned by the deliberate pealing of bells from a neighbouring church. 'Tis a dodge of the parson's', muttered a working man, and so it was. The following day *The Times* leader reassured its readers that 'the threatened triumph of anarchy and socialism had been postponed'.

Despite the inauspicious start to the universal solidarity of labour, Morris vigorously defended the decision to march on 1 May, and attacked those who sought to 'palliate the system' while desiring socialism. *Commonweal* reaffirmed, 'we have begun, so shall we go on; as each recurring May Day comes and goes, our strength will be seen to leap steadily up and up, until we are strong enough to push aside the sneaks and faint-hearts who embarrass us, break down the barriers that confront us, and enter the promised land.' Morris never wavered in his support for 1 May as the date for the celebration of the solidarity of labour, and at his Kelmscott Press, was to say to his foreman, 'I come to tell you that you must take a holiday on May first, Labour Day.'



Switzerland, 1904

The following year repeated the success of 1890, with May Day marked by strikes and demonstrations for the eight hour working day and political rights. Each successive year it grew in strength as more countries joined in celebrating May Day as a day that belonged to international labour. In 1901, a young revolutionary, Joseph Stalin, organised a May Day demonstration in the centre of Tiflis, an event greeted by Lenin's paper *Iskra* as being of historic importance for the whole of the Caucasus. In Brazil, May Day was first celebrated in 1892, in Greece 1893, South Africa 1904 — but only by white workers — Chile, 1907. The movement spread to Asia, with Indonesia joining in 1918, China, 1920 and Japan, 1922. May Day fostered the concept of proletarian internationalism. At the London rally in Hyde Park in 1904, the platforms included an international platform of speakers, chaired by Herbert Burrows, with speeches by fraternal delegates in German, Polish, Yiddish and Russian. The resolution restated the demand for an eight hour day, but went further, calling for 'free maintenance of all children in schools, the provision of old age pensions, universal suffrage, second ballot and payment of members and election expenses.'

For centuries, May Day had been celebrated as the rebirth of nature, the awakening of flowers and the first shoots of crops, the herald of summer. From 1890, the ritual festival, sanctified with garlanded May Queens, May poles and may blossom was appropriated by an awakening working class, transforming the rural idyll into a proletarian red gala day, greeting the rising sun of socialism, an international proclamation of hope, progress and emancipation. Labour's May Day gave birth to a new visual culture, the stirring of labour with spring flowers clutched by a red-robed Marianne. The workers' May pole was bedecked with ribbons bearing the slogans of 'eight hours', 'leisure for all', 'abolition of privilege', 'socialisation and solidarity', and 'the land for the people'.

Central to the creation of the new imagery of May Day in its varied forms, banners, prints, posters, and illustrations, was the great socialist artist, Walter Crane. Apprenticed in 1858 at the age of thirteen to the Chartist, William James Linton, as a wood engraver, Crane was later to build a considerable reputation as a decorative artist and book illustrator. At the peak of his fame, he was won for the cause of revolutionary socialism. As Crane was to write, 'it was no sudden conversion,' but a gradual transition. A friend of William Morris, whom he first met in 1870, it was William Morris's pamphlet *Art and Socialism* that acted as the final catalyst. He followed Morris into the Social Democratic Federation in 1884, and became part of the small band of crusading socialists whose lives were a round of lectures, meetings,





· A · GARLAND · FOR · MAY · DAY · 1895 ·  
 · DEDICATED · TO · THE · WORKERS · BY · WALTER · CRANE ·

*A Garland for May Day, Walter Crane, 1895*

demonstrations and endless discussion as to how and when the social revolution would come.

Crane took part in many great mass demonstrations, including the famous march to Trafalgar Square on 13 November, 1887, when eighty thousand marchers were savagely repelled by 4,000 police, reinforced by troops with loaded rifles and fixed bayonets. Hundreds were injured and Crane was shocked by the brutality of the police in attacking the marchers as they arrived with bands playing and banners flying. Crane in his *Reminiscences* was to write of 'broken heads, men bleeding', and seeing in the gloom of that November evening, 'the glitter of bayonets and the red line in front of the National Gallery'. The day was to enter the annals of British labour history as 'Bloody Sunday'. At another rally in Hyde Park the following Sunday, a demonstrator, Alfred Linnell, died after being trampled by a police horse. A great funeral was arranged by the socialists, for which William Morris wrote the words of a death song, set to music by Malcolm Lawson and printed with a cover design by Walter Crane. Crane's graphic illustration depicted Justice and Liberty defending Linnell against the attack of a mounted policeman, and hundreds of copies were sold in the streets along the route of the funeral procession.

Four years later, in 1891, Crane commemorated the first International Labour May Day with a magnificent drawing entitled 'The Triumph of Labour', which he dedicated to 'the wage workers of all countries'. The drawing depicts a flowing procession of working men, women, children, horses and oxen, a leafy portrayal of a Morris-like vision of Merrie England, led by a winged woman wearing a cap of liberty, flowing robes, and holding aloft a flaming torch. If the imagery was romantic, the message was clear, an abundant and happy life through socialism. The banners flowing in the cavalcade bear slogans, 'liberty, equality, fraternity', 'labour is the source of wealth', 'the international solidarity of labour', and 'wage workers of the world, unite'. Engraved by Henry Scheu, it was printed in English, German, French and Italian from lettering drawn by Crane. The prints were to adorn the homes and meeting rooms of socialists and trade unionists throughout Europe for decades to come.

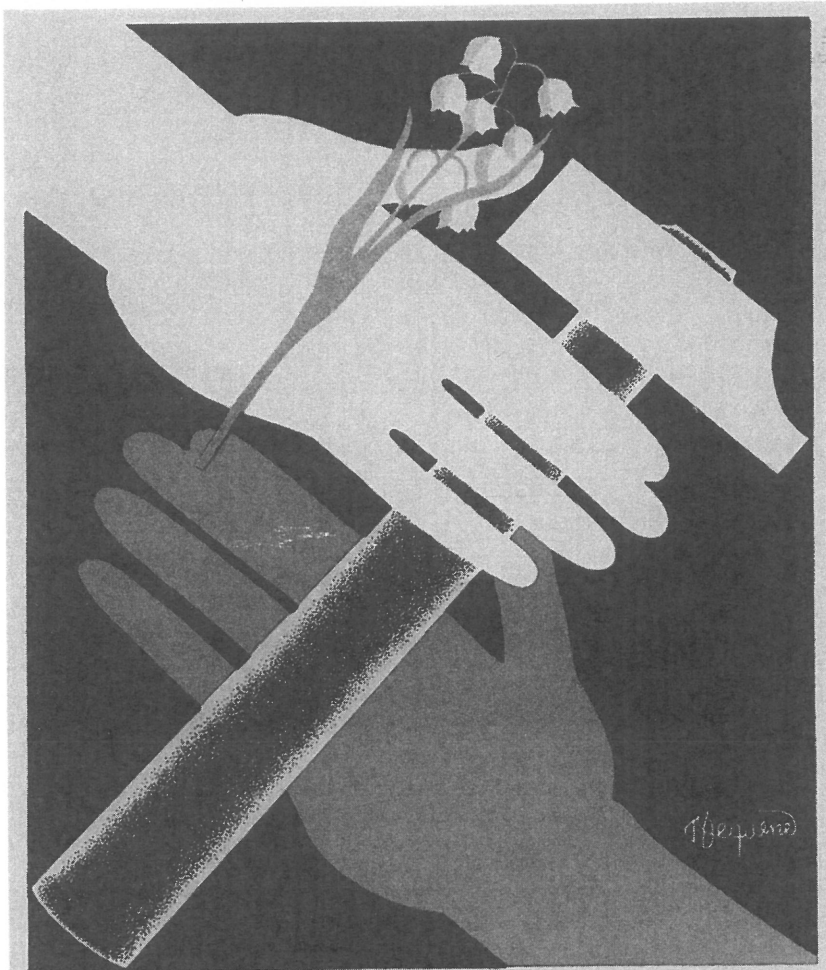
May Day became a source of inspiration to Crane, and with brush and pen he gave visual form to the dream and hope of the realisation of the co-operative commonwealth. In 1888 he had anticipated the coming bond of internationalism with his drawing, 'The Solidarity of Labour', with figures representing Africa, India, Australia and America, clasping hands around the globe. In 1894, he designed 'The Workers' May-Pole', a cartoon for *Justice*. The following year 'A Garland for May Day', drawn especially for the May Day issue of Robert

Blatchford's *Clarion*. In 1898, came 'Flowers for Labour's May Day', with an 'eight hours bloom' and a flowering of 'unity'. In 1903, 'A posy for May Day', and in 1906 and 1907, two further souvenirs for May Day. His cartoons for *Justice*, *Commonweal*, *Labour Leader* and *Clarion*, reprinted by The Twentieth Century Press as *Cartoons for the Cause*, to mark the International Socialist Workers and Trades Union Congress held in London in 1896, were to become a ready source for the burgeoning iconography of socialism.

Of all Crane's images, the mostly widely used and modified was his allegorical figure of a winged woman, an angel of freedom, which was to become a recurring theme in his socialist art. Crane first exhibited the image at the Grosvenor Gallery in 1885, where it appeared in a painting on the theme of 'Freedom', inspired by Swinburne's poem, 'The Era of Revolution'. In the picture, a winged figure in flowing robes and wearing the *bonnet rouge*, rescues humanity symbolised by a youth, chained and imprisoned, guarded by a king in armour and a cowled priest, the two figures helping to keep humanity in chains symbolising the monarchy and the church.

Crane's angel of freedom was freely adapted as an image to adorn countless trade union banners, sometimes the angel would be handing a worker the key to the gate of emancipation, sometimes pointing the direction to the socialist commonwealth. His female angel, whether interpreted as Freedom, Justice, Peace, or harbinger of socialism, swept through the international labour movement, to be woven into the imagery of organised labour. When Crane died in 1915, Hyndman was to write of him, 'Nobody, not even William Morris did more to make art a direct helpmeet to socialist propaganda.'

Crane's pervasive art for labour took its place amid a profusion of working class symbolism that blossomed with the flowering of May Day in other lands, red roses and carnations in the hands of women, hammers in the hands of men. Muscular working men rolled their shirt-sleeves to bulging biceps to wield massive hammers, breaking chains, smashing capitalism, or beating swords into ploughshares. Anvils and hammers symbolised the power of labour, capable of shaping a new world. Triple eights were intertwined, red flags rippled, workers and peasants marched shoulder-to-shoulder with banners raised in endless procession. Ahead was the rising sun of socialism, its rays heralding the birth of the socialist commonwealth. For the most part, women were depicted as goddess-like figures of Peace, Truth, or Hope, statuesque, in classical Greco-Roman form, or derivative of the French Marianne, to be found hovering above the struggle or pointing the way to emancipation. Yet, which ever the country, there was a common theme to the art of May Day, namely, the power of unity and the future for socialism. The



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**ALBUM** du **1<sup>er</sup> MAI**  
**1932**  **Prix: 4fr. 50**

*Belgium, 1932*

art of labours' May Day was created outside of gallery or salon, without wealthy patrons, and if it sometimes used, perhaps without awareness, emblems rooted in bible or mythology, then it transformed that art into the militant voice of the working class.

The fight for the eight hour day continued to be the main theme for May Day demonstrations in Britain until the First World War, supplemented each year by the political demands of the moment. Whilst international unity was maintained, there were still differences between those who argued for marking May Day on 1 May, and those who favoured the first Sunday in May. The 1 May protagonists made considerable ground in the late 1890s, but the number of workers responding to the call to strike on May Day never matched those who demonstrated on Sundays. There were differences too between those who saw May Day as a day of celebration, a joyous workers' festival, and those who were committed to taking to the streets for a day of political action. In Britain at least, compromise was always possible and while the pageantry of May Day flourished, it remained socialist in character.

In 1900, the London demonstration was moved from its usual venue in Hyde Park, to Crystal Palace, for a family day of sport and entertainment. The highlight of the evening was a pyrotechnic display designed by Walter Crane, in which his 'Solidarity of Labour' cartoon was reproduced in fireworks, complete with the motto, 'The unity of labour is the hope of the world.' During the day, in the intervals between events, the advocates of a political May Day held sway, with a vast meeting addressed by trade union and socialist speakers including, Ben Tillett, Hyndman, Pete Curran and G F Barnes, Secretary of the Amalgamated Engineers.

Next year, the London May Day celebration reverted to Hyde park, and although the mass demonstrations in the first decade of the century did not match those of the 1890s, they still commanded wide support. In 1906, the May Day demonstration in Hyde Park still had the need for twelve platforms, for speeches by Will Thorne, Margaret Bondfield, Mary MacArthur, J R Clynes and other trade union leaders. Nevertheless, concerned with the gradual decline, The Trades Union Congress of 1909 passed a resolution urging the organised workers to fall into line with their comrades of other countries to demonstrate on Labour Day. Fortuitously the next 1 May fell on a Sunday, and the demonstration in the capital was successfully organised as a stunning spectacle of 'imposing size'. The procession was enlivened by two thousand children from the Socialist Sunday Schools, conveyed in nearly a hundred horse-drawn wagons, with the children

DARTMOOR PRISON.

LABOUR DAY.

1<sup>st</sup> MAY, 1917

DEMONSTRATION,

IN

THE COMMUNAL  
HALL

AT 7. 30. P. M.

*'The joy of May Day to the Socialist of to-day, is not the joy of the harvestman; it is the joy of the sower.'*

KEIR HARDIE.



singing socialist hymns. Three hundred Clarion cyclists wearing red roses pedalled the route and more than a hundred trade unions and socialist societies were represented, all with their banners. It was socialist spectacle to inspire the working people who lined the streets, and to shake the middle class onlookers who peered from the windows of hotels and restaurants of London's West End.

Among the speakers at the concluding rally was the new star of socialist oratory, Victor Grayson.

The advent of the First World War destroyed the Second International and shattered the international solidarity of labour. The movement was split asunder as many trade union and labour leaders throughout Europe rushed to join in the frenzy of jingoism and support the slaughter, deserting the red flag for the false colour of patriotism. The tragedy of the division was mirrored in Britain's wartime May Days, as some working class leaders, like Will Thorne, rejoicing in the title of lieutenant colonel in the West Ham Volunteers, appeared on platforms in full martial uniform, complete with spurs, while others, like John Maclean, had to listen to the strains of the *Red Flag* being sung on May Day by demonstrators at Glasgow Green from his prison cell.

Trades councils continued to organise their May Day meetings in towns around Britain, where resolutions of international fraternity were passed at some, while others looked forward to the resumption of fraternal relations, after the war! In Halifax and Leeds, there were united May Day meetings of the Independent Labour Party, the local Trades Councils, and the British Socialist Party, but the Labour Party stood aside, its platforms used for recruiting, as veteran working class leaders urged their fellow workers onward to destruction. The British Socialist Party's proposed May Day demonstration in 1915 was banned on the instruction of the government who objected to a draft resolution that was critical of one of the Allies, the Russian government, for imprisoning socialist members of the Duma and banishing trade unionists to Siberia. In Glasgow, May Day marchers carrying socialist anti-war slogans were hissed and jeered by onlookers. In various parts of the country, magistrates refused the use of halls for May Day meetings, and as late as 1918, a plan to combine the London May Day with a commemoration of the centenary of the birth of Karl Marx with a march to Highgate cemetery was banned by the Home Secretary.

Others remained true to their socialist principles and suffered imprisonment and persecution. By 1917 there were so many socialist conscientious objectors

in Dartmoor Prison, that the ILP were able to form a branch of the party for those who refused to fight in an imperialist war. With indomitable spirit, they celebrated May Day with a concert, at which they sang the *Red Flag* and *Sons Of Labour*.

In general, the policies of the social democratic parties in Europe, was to support the war. The German Social Democrats called upon the workers to remain at work on May Day, to support the war effort. In France, the Socialists assured the government that it had nothing to fear on May Day, and urged workers to work for the defence of their country. Throughout the rest of Europe it was a similar story, with social democrats rallying to the flags of chauvinism, and a comparatively small number of true socialists keeping faith with the principle of international working class solidarity. Despite the war, May Day continued to be celebrated, and in all countries there were some socialists prepared to use the May Day platform to condemn the war. In Germany, on 1 May, 1916, Karl Liebknecht denounced the war at a mass meeting of workers in Berlin, was arrested and sentenced to two and a half years imprisonment.

After the war, the labour movement resumed its established tradition of May Day processions, and in 1919 there is an account of the London demonstration being attended by large numbers of servicemen in uniform. The post war years were a period of militant trade union activity, and in 1920 there was a strong movement supported by the Miners' Federation of Great Britain to cease work on May Day. Under the slogan, 'May Day, when factories and mines will cease work,' a degree of success was achieved and large demonstrations were reported in London, Glasgow, Manchester and Derby. By 1924 however, the size of May Day demonstrations had declined, and Willie Gallacher recounted how he and Harry McShane led a May Day march in Glasgow that mustered barely a hundred supporters, a pitiful contrast to the tens of thousands that had followed them a few years earlier.

Resurgence came in 1926. The 1 May dawned with nearly a million miners locked out because they would not accept the coal owners terms of less pay and longer hours. With the decision of the TUC to call a national strike on 3 May if settlement could not be reached, the mood of May Day marchers all over Britain was one of militant solidarity with the miners. 'Stand by the miners' was the slogan of the day, and marchers rallied in their tens of thousands to give public support for their beleaguered comrades. Some anticipated a bloody struggle. 'Don't shoot the workers,' proclaimed the banner of a group of Communists in the procession to Belle Vue in



# JOIN THE PARADE **MAY 1<sup>ST</sup>**



**FOR AND PEACE, DEMOCRACY LABOR UNITY!**

USA, 1952

Manchester. In London, a group of stalwart young men marched behind the red banner of the Workers' Defence Corps. Glasgow saw a record number of more than 50,000 march to hear speeches by two of the 'red Clydeside' MPs, Maxton and Wheatley, and Maxton said that 'Glasgow stood solid for the working class fight, whatever the cost and whatever the consequences.' Wherever workers gathered that day, the *Red Flag* was sung with a special fervour.

The story of how Britain's workers responded with class solidarity in defence of the miners is familiar history. So too is the folk memory of the abandonment of the struggle by the General Council of the TUC at the very time when the solid strike was gaining even greater strength. For six bitter months the miners were left to fight alone until they were finally driven back by sheer hunger. There was little joy in the May Day celebrations of 1927, with the trade unions under attack from a vengeful Tory government.

Despite a decline in trade union membership following the defeat of the miners, the organised working class continued to resist attacks on their living standards. May Day, 1930, saw Londoners giving a tremendous welcome to the arrival of the hunger marchers who had foot-slogged hundreds of miles from many towns and cities. Organised by the National Unemployed Workers' Movement, the marchers arrived at Hyde Park to swell the May Day demonstration, 20,000 workers lining the approach to Hyde Park to greet the marchers who had tramped from Scotland in the north and from Plymouth in the south. Marching with field kitchens and bedding they were given a tumultuous reception as they joined another 30,000 marchers, hundreds waving red flags, united in condemning the misery of Britain's workless.

Throughout the 1930s, Britain's May Day marches were characterised by the fight against unemployment, fascism and war. Tom Mann's May Day message in 1936, was, 'Let the blood red banners wave. Shout the slogans far and wide. Down with poverty. Down with wage slavery. Down with capitalism.'

Coronation year, 1937, saw the largest London May Day since 1926, organised by the left-wing London Central May First Committee, supported by the Communist Party. Planned with immense organisational skill, scores of contingents were mustered, trade unions, tenants' associations, the unemployed, co-operative guilds, peace organisations, Left Book Clubs, the Socialist Christian League and the Artists' International Association among them, presenting one of the most colourful and disciplined processions ever seen in the capital. Escorted by a detachment of motor cyclists flying

red pennants, pride of place was given to London's busmen, who were on strike. Led by a solitary bus driver in his white driving coat and carrying a red flag, the white-coated drivers and blue-uniformed conductors followed, their union banner, brilliant in the sunshine, heading the lengthy column. At the rear, came the Communist Party amid a sea of red flags, bearing huge portraits of leaders of the Communist International: Stalin, Dimitrov, Thorez, Togliatti, Gottwald and Pollitt. But it was not a united front, for the Labour Party held their own, separate demonstration. While the broad left supporters rallied to hear speeches from Tom Mann, Harry Pollitt, Fenner Brockway and Wal Hannington, the Labour Party assembled to hear Clement Attlee and Doctor Salter. Both sides supported the busmen, both were against unemployment and fascism, yet they were divided by their fundamental political differences.

May Day, 1938, fell on a Sunday and London once again witnessed two huge and colourful processions. The theme of the marchers was the defence of republican Spain against fascism. The tricolour of the Spanish republic rippled alongside red flags as tens of thousands dedicated May Day to international working class resistance to fascism. West London engineers paraded an ambulance of the type they had sent to Spain, nurses in uniform carried white sheets into which the crowd threw coins to buy aid for Spain, the Communist banners emblazoned with the slogan, 'Arms for Spain'. The biggest cheers of the onlookers came for wounded members of the International Brigade who 'stirred the crowds with the singing of revolutionary songs.' On the Labour platform, Herbert Morrison said, 'Let us remember the heroic Spanish people and their fight against foreign invasion for the freedom of the whole world.'

1 May, 1940, was the fiftieth anniversary of May Day, but with most of Europe at war, it hardly a day for celebration. The Soviet Union had signed a non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany, and fascism was in the ascendant. Nevertheless, in Manchester, the resolution put to the May Day demonstration in Queen's Park captured the spirit of working class solidarity as they remembered, 'with comradeship our socialist, trade union and co-operative friends in Germany and all lands subjugated by Nazi and fascist tyranny.' The Communist Party, supporting the Moscow line that it was an imperialist war, had to be content with slogans urging, 'Long live the USSR', and 'Higher wages now.' In Lanarkshire, where the miners held their annual gala on May Day, the police asked Communist supporters to withdraw their banner which read, 'Stop the war', as it 'hindered the war effort.' For the Communists, May



Manchester, 1945

Day 1940 was a day of isolation and a barrage of abuse. Unity came in 1942, following the Nazi attack on the Soviet Union. May Day platforms were shared by Communist and Labour alike, the hammer and sickle proudly printed on Labour Party souvenir programmes alongside the Labour Party emblem and flags of the allies. This new spirit of unity was to survive throughout the war.

With the coming of peace in Europe, the great Labour victory of 1945 seemed to herald a new dawn as triumphant Labour MPs sang the *Red Flag* in the House of Commons. The May Day message of Labour-controlled Coventry in 1946 captured the mood of the times, 'The commonweal is now the endeavour, and the will of the people finds expression in legislation aimed at providing the good life. On this first May Day under Labour rule, we affirm our faith in socialist ideals and say again, "Workers of the world, Unite, you have nothing to lose but your chains", the others have nothing to lose but their unworthy gains.'

In war and peace, there have been countries where May Day has been illegal. Under fascist dictatorship, May Day in Portugal was banned for almost half a century. South Africa abolished the right to celebrate May Day in 1963, which right is now happily restored. Other regimes usurped May Day as a means of staging mass support for their dictatorships, as happened in fascist Italy, Spain and Nazi Germany. Even in countries where May Day itself has not been illegal, marches and demonstrations of workers have frequently been broken up by police and troops, resulting in death and injury to many thousands over the years. Britain too has had its bans. In 1948 and 1949, the Home Secretary of the post war Labour government — with the support of the cabinet — banned the London Trades Council's traditional May Day processions in the capital. The reason given was the threat of disorder likely to be provoked by Mosley's fascists. Rejecting the shameful capitulation to fascist intimidation, thousands ignored the bans, marching defiantly to rally in Trafalgar Square with banners raised.

The Soviet Union was the first country to proclaim May Day as a public holiday. Following the October Revolution in 1917, the first May Days were spontaneous demonstrations of support for the Soviets, marked with marches, slogan banners, music and dancing. The revolution unleashed the creative talent of worker artists, producing innovative art celebrating May Day in the form of posters, paintings, murals, ceramics, procession floats and banners. After the death of Lenin in 1924, May Day reverted to a day of work, to 'win the battle of production'. May Day in Moscow



**MAY 1<sup>st</sup>**

**workers unity will  
crush exploitation**

*South Africa, 1984*



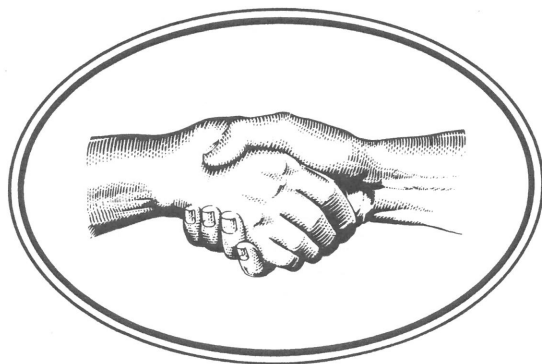
became a succession enormous parades, marching past Soviet leaders who viewed the masses from a vantage point high on the Lenin mausoleum in Red Square. Soviet May Days degenerated to become vast set pieces of state propaganda, increasingly used to display the military might of the Soviet Union, reaching absurd proportions during the height of the cold war with gigantic intercontinental ballistic missiles being trundled through the city for hours on end. The structured Soviet May Day was to be replicated after the Second World War by the Peoples' Democracies of Eastern Europe, until the workers reclaimed May Day for themselves.

May Day is now celebrated by organised labour in most countries of the world, especially in third world countries where trade unions are fighting multi-national companies in an effort to combat exploitation by Western market-driven economies. Paradoxically, while the global celebration of May Day has grown, in Britain it has declined, although it has been a public holiday in the UK since legislation by a Labour government in 1978. The biggest demonstrations of the past thirty years have focused on single issues, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, the Vietnam solidarity campaign, the 1971 TUC organised protest against the Industrial Relations Bill, the anti-apartheid movement, and support for the 1984 miners' strike, have all dwarfed the size of the traditional May Day marches and rallies. By the early 1970s, the Labour Party had forsaken the traditional May Day procession in favour of a concert in the Royal Festival Hall. This year, the Labour Party has no official plan to celebrate May Day.

Is there an arguable case for the reinstatement of May day in the Labour calendar as a day of struggle and solidarity with the working people of other lands, or is it an anachronism as relevant as the Durham Miners' Gala? With the constant development of the global economy, the easy movement of capital and the relentless search by multi-national companies for cheaper labour and new markets, the concept of the first May Day, as a day of international working class action for shorter hours and social advance is surely as valid as ever. In Britain, while millions are unemployed, working hours for those with jobs have lengthened, millions toiling for more than eight hours a day, despite the technological advances of the past century. The use of part-time workers by employers to avoid statutory rights has grown and hard-won trade union rights have been eroded by the legislation of successive Tory governments.

The need for working men and women of all lands to enjoy useful work, in decent conditions, with just reward and ample leisure remains a priority for all trade unionists and socialists. Internationalism cuts across the frontiers of divisive nationalism, uniting working people in a common cause. Clement Attlee in a May Day message to Labour, wrote, 'Here in this country, we have a duty to perform. The workers of Britain have a long and glorious history of achievement in the cause of liberty. Now is the time to redouble our efforts to achieve power in order to realise our socialist ideal.'

It is time to reclaim May Day and renew that pledge.





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*Back cover, part of 'The Triumph of Labour', by Walter Crane, 1891*

