

May Day & the Origins of International Workers' Day

by Tom Moates

GROWING UP IN Virginia, I had only a dim awareness that May Day was some kind of workers' holiday... somewhere. Imagine my surprise recently when I discovered that not only is May 1 recognized throughout the world (with the exception of the U.S., Canada, and South Africa) as International Workers' Day, but that the holiday originated right here in the U.S., only a day's drive from the New River Valley.

While working people constitute the vast majority of the U.S. population, it seems odd that this holiday has been obliterated from the memory of the people who made it possible. In fact, our media and public educational system are so good at omitting certain news and historical facts that I'd never once caught a glimpse of workers in other countries celebrating this major holiday or run across the fact that it commemorates one of the most important victories for working people of all time: the establishment of the eight hour workday spearheaded by American workers in Chicago.

As early as 1791, working people had struck for reasonable workday lengths when carpenters in Philadelphia walked off the job to establish a ten hour workday. Employers continually forced workers, skilled and unskilled, regardless of gender, age, or ethnic background, to work long days, sometimes more than fourteen hours, without overtime or even any reasonable compensation, whenever they could. By 1863, the Machinists' and Blacksmiths' Union put



the demand for the eight hour workday as its top priority. In 1872, a hundred thousand workers in New York City struck and won the eight hour workday for themselves, mostly in the building trades.

In 1884 a resolution passed by the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions of the United States and Canada (forerunner to the American Federation of Labor) declared that eight hours would be the length of the legal work day after May 1, 1886. Legislative efforts to achieve this goal were spurred on by the Knights of Labor (which claimed 700,000 members in 1886), but these efforts were unavailing. Another group, the International Working People's Association (IWPA), an anarchist group in the labor movement, rejected the political approach and took on employers through direct militant tactics, including strikes. The workers' May 1 movement quickly gained momentum, even among the ranks of the Knights of Labor, whose leader, Terence Powderly, issued a letter on

March 13, 1886, forbidding Knights members to strike on May 1. Despite this warning, local Knights leaders joined with the IWPA and organized for May 1 in Chicago, and Knights also played large roles in the movement in Cincinnati and Milwaukee.

THE INTENSE SUPPORT for the eight hour movement and the growing strength of the workers around this issue caused a panic among the employing class, prompting businessmen to grant more than 30,000 workers the eight hour day in April 1886, weeks before the May 1 deadline. When May 1 arrived, hundreds of thousands of people showed their force through peaceful strikes and demonstrations. Chicago had the largest demonstration, where 90,000 marched. New York and Detroit saw at least 10,000 marchers each. Rallies in Louisville, Kentucky and Baltimore, Maryland, were noted as remarkable for unity between black and white workers. In total, as many as half a million across the country took part in the May 1 demonstrations.

As the movement took on a revolutionary character and continued to grow, many business owners, still holding out against the workers' demands for a reasonable workday, turned to the police and state militia. Businessmen equipped these soldiers so they could combat the strikers. (Chicago's Commercial Club, for instance, purchased a \$2,000 machine gun for the Illinois National Guard.)

By May 1, the movement could claim gains for many of the striking workers, but two days later, as Chicago strikers numbered 65,000, industry

May Day 2000 events
– see page 15

representatives concluded that decisive action against the demonstrators was needed. August Spies, one of the IWPA leaders, was speaking on the afternoon of May 3, and as he addressed striking workers, gunshots were heard from the nearby McCormick Harvester plant. Spies and the workers present headed toward the plant, knowing many workers there had been locked out for three months. As they approached, hundreds of police officers intercepted them, attacked the workers with clubs, and began firing into the crowd. At least four workers were killed, and many others were injured.

Spies called for a mass rally at Haymarket Square the next day to protest the murders and police brutality. Chicago's mayor attended the rally to try and insure it would remain peaceful, and about 3,000 demonstrators arrived. Just after the mayor finished speaking and left the rally, 180 police officers showed up and ordered the meeting to disperse. Another IWPA leader, Samuel Fielden, was speaking at the time, and he protested that the rally was peaceful. As the police captain was giving orders to break up the rally, a bomb was thrown from the crowd into the ranks of the police. Sixty-six officers were wounded, and seven later died. The police opened up on the remaining crowd with their firearms, wounding 200 and killing several.

A FRENZY FOLLOWED, with authorities ransacking offices and homes of suspected radicals, and hundreds were arrested

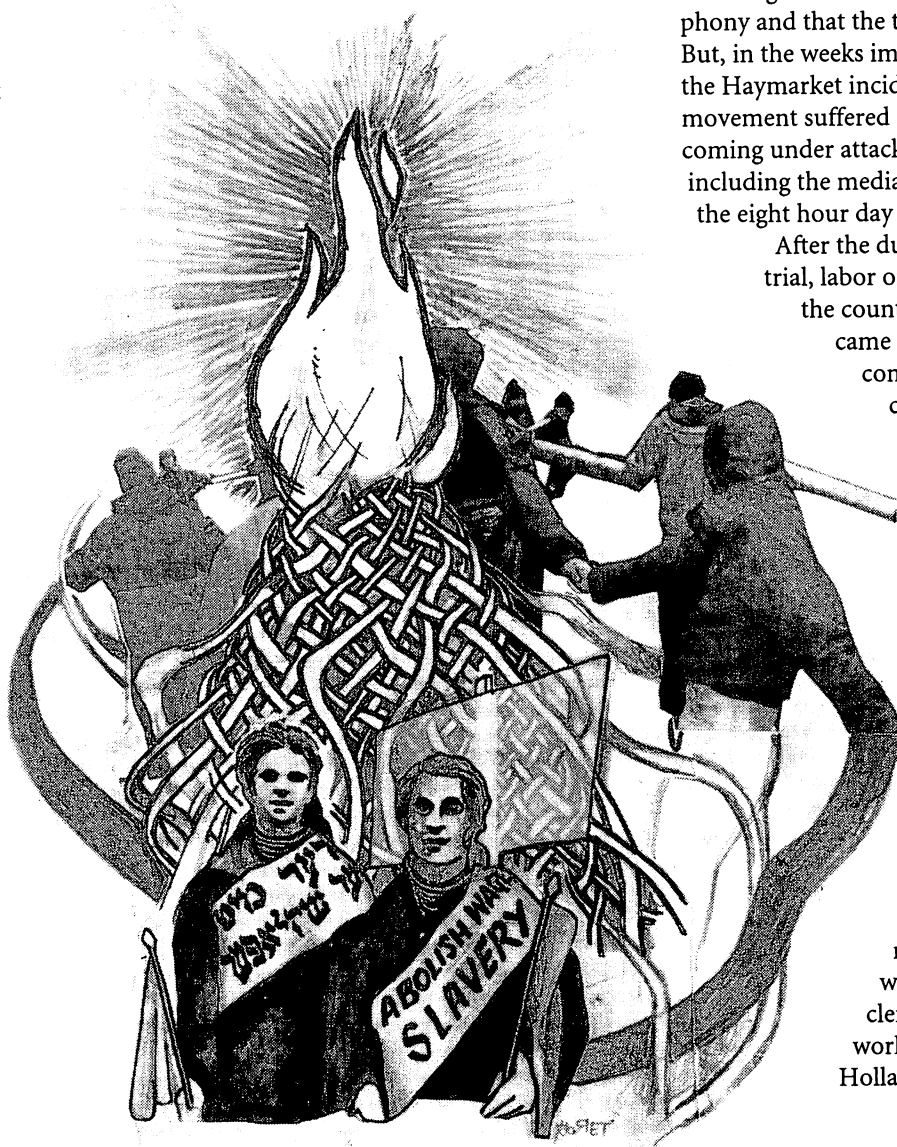
without charge. Eight anarchist leaders were taken into custody: Spies, Fielden, Michael Schwab, Adolph Fischer, George Engel, Louis Lingg, Oscar Neebe, and Albert Parsons. No evidence was produced to show that any of the eight had thrown the bomb, or even conspired to throw the bomb. In fact, it seems that of the eight, only Fielden was present at the rally at the time of the bombing, and he was on stage speaking. The trial was summed up by prosecuting attorney Julius Grinnel, who said in his closing remarks, "Law is upon trial. Anarchy is upon trial. These men have been selected, picked out by the grand jury and indicted because they were

leaders. They are no more guilty than the thousands who follow them... Convict these men, make examples of them, hang them and save our institutions, our society."

All of the leaders received the death sentence except Neebe. Fielden and Schwab had their sentences reduced to life in prison after petitioning for clemency. Twenty-one year old Lingg committed suicide by exploding a dynamite tube in his mouth before his sentence could be carried out. The others were hanged on November 11, 1887. The Governor of Illinois, John Atgeld, freed Neebe, Fielden, and Schwab and posthumously pardoned the five executed men six years later, revealing that much of the evidence was phony and that the trial was a frame up. But, in the weeks immediately following the Haymarket incident, the entire labor movement suffered major setbacks, coming under attack from every side, including the media, and the strikes for the eight hour day mostly collapsed.

After the dust settled from the trial, labor organizations across the country and the world came to the defense of the convicted to demand clemency. While many Knights of Labor locals supported the clemency campaign, their national officials used the situation to attack the anarchists as rivals. The fledgling American Federation of Labor issued a public appeal for clemency in the matter, and money was raised for the clemency fight from workers in England, Holland, Russia. Italy,

continued on page 50





The Crone
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*My mother plucked me
from the great dance
of great birds
flying like stars, points
of light on maps
moving in the velvet wall
of night sky.
And I was called
the Daughter of Memory
and the Grandchild of Time.
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continued from preceding page

tact me for information or with ideas/suggestions for rituals, direct actions, fundraising, etc. by sending a message from the website. We each hold in our hearts the dream of a new world. May we create this dream together, through our love of each other and the Mother. Blessed Be!

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• Contact Manulife Financial, whose support is critical to Texada's plans. This would be very powerful coming from outside BC, letting Manulife know that the world is watching. See the website for details.

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• Visit the site, pass it on, send us letters and positive vibes — we will post them. The knowledge that there is support from afar is very powerful for people here. Living on an island with a population of 10,000, you feel that you are fighting alone.

History of May Day

continued from page 23

France, and Spain.

THE U.S. WORKING CLASS was catapulted by this incident to the head of the world's workers' movement and particularly to the forefront of the movement to achieve the eight hour workday with a new round of strikes and demonstrations. The entire world took this decision very seriously.

The AFL sent a delegate to the 1889 Marxist International Socialist Congress meeting in Paris on the 100th anniversary of the French Revolution to inform all present of the call to action for May 1, 1890. That congress passed a resolution for a "great international demonstration" for the eight hour day to take place on the AFL-designated date.

When May 1, 1890 rolled around, demonstrations took place in the U.S. and all across Europe, as well as in Chile, Peru, and Cuba. While the May Day demonstrations were intended originally to be a one-time event, the eight hour day movement gained such support that it became a worldwide annual event. The second year added Russia,

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Brazil, and Ireland to the growing list of participating countries. The struggle for the eight hour day continued the world over, as did May Day demonstrations. In 1920 Chinese workers first celebrated the event, and in 1927 workers in India joined the struggle and celebrated May 1 as International Workers' Day.

So, what happened here in the U.S.? Why is May 1 officially "Law Day" here, rather than International Workers' Day? And, why is our "Labor Day" detached from historical significance and more a beer-hotdog-shopping ritual than a serious commemoration of the blood shed to gain the majority of Americans the opportunity for a decent life?

Historically speaking, the AFL dropped its support of May Day almost as soon as it started, because of the right-wing elements gaining control in the organization. It chose to celebrate instead the federal government's officially sanctioned Labor Day (the first Monday of September), established in 1894. The U.S. May Day movements from that time onward were supported by those on the left, but they were met by great hostility from the entrenched, conservative labor bureaucracy.

Even so, May Day was still celebrated on U.S. soils. In 1910, rallied by the Socialist Party, 60,000 people demonstrated on May 1 in the streets of New York City. The following year, 500,000 were said to have marched on May Day. But, as workers and peasants took control of Russia and the Soviet Union was established in the late teens, the red scare gripped the United States, so that any May Day demonstrations came under violent attack and denunciation in the press.

As for me, I've come to my own understanding about this workers' holiday now that I've uncovered its history. May Day isn't about workers in one industry or another making headway against employers. It is about working people anywhere and everywhere in solidarity and creating change. Across Virginia, the U.S., and the whole world almost every one of us shares the bond that we are workers. The fact that almost all of us work for money and thereby acquire food, goods, and services is a great bond connecting us.

May Day echoes the voices of those before us, reverberating across the world the call to maintain what was gained through great pain, effort, and bloodshed, and it speaks of the sacrifices that improved conditions for millions of people against great odds. It should remind us that if we focus our efforts collectively we will change the order of business.

Author's Note: Interest in May Day is on the rise, with many organizations and communities recapturing the energy of this movement. Workers in Edmonton, Canada, have developed a website devoted entirely to the holiday. This award-winning site contains information, as well as photos from around the world on International Workers' Day demonstrations from past years. The address, which has links to many great labor-related sites, is <http://www.accessweb.com/mayday/>

See page 15 of this issue of RQ for May Day 2000 events.

This article originally appeared in the New River Free Press, an outstanding regional publication based in Blacksburg, VA. Contact NRFP, PO Box 846, Blacksburg, VA 24063, (540) 951-7320.

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Book: Circle Round

continued from page 24

parents honoring their children in these ways is always worthy reading. There are also rituals for occasions such as moving, divorces, and the death of a pet.

Part Four is the Circle of Elements. Although these seemed well-covered already, I discovered that this could be the most important part of the book. This section was about how to make magic life daily life. Forgive me for not remembering from whom or from which Goddess Trilog video this comes, but a woman in that video said that for pagans of old it was not so much about belief, but practice and a way of living. This section is about the everyday rituals we live, from getting up and off to school to bath time. This section is how we as parents, Witches, Pagans, live it day in and day out, not just on holidays.

Now for the hard part, what I didn't 'just love' about *Circle Round*. There are a few stories in the book that are apparently written just for the book. Some I liked, and some I felt were overhanded and preachy. My children agreed. Children know what they like and do not like and have no problem letting any and or everyone know about it. While these stories are probably not meant to be children's favorites, this does not a whole book make.

Finally, as a mother who wants to do so much more for my children than my mother did, I struggle with that current mother question of "Is it enough, or is it too much?" *Circle Round* was written by three women. It would probably take three mother-lifetimes to do all the wonderful things from this book. I just have to say, pick and

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