

RECLAIM  
1ST OF MAY



In many countries around the world, 1<sup>st</sup> of May is celebrated as “Labor Day”: Public festivals, bicycle tours and high alcohol consumption dominate the scene. Only a few take part in the ritualized demonstrations of the established trade unions. Hardly anyone is aware of the militant origins of May Day as a day of struggle for the international workers' movement.

The first May Day was a riot! However, most people do not know it as “May Day”, but as the “Haymarket Riot” (Chicago, 1886). In this text, we want to explain why this is the case and how communist, socialist and social democratic forces are practising historical revisionism here.

### **The situation of workers and the role of anarchists**

Although the 8-hour day was already law in the USA in the second half of the 19th century, it was ignored by employers. At least 12 hours of daily work and child labor were the order of the day despite high unemployment among adults at the same time. Workers' rights did not exist in reality. They lived in completely overcrowded barracks and tenements, where the worst hygienic conditions prevailed.

The anarchists were a driving force behind the movement and were rooted in the trade unions. In the spring of 1886, the movement to actually implement the 8-hour day reached its peak. The workers set May 1, 1886 as the deadline for its realization.

//Brief insertion: From the very beginning, the anarchists fought against any form of wage labor, no matter how many hours. In their opinion, the exploitative, oppressive relationship between workers and employers does not change in its basic form if there are a few more rights or a few fewer hours. Nevertheless, they decided not to split off (for fear of

becoming insignificant), but to lead the common struggle with all workers and to make compromises in the process. Samuel Fielden, one of the anarchists sentenced to death, described the fight for the 8-hour day as follows: "Working 8 hours is also slavery. Working 2 hours is also slavery. The only way to liberate labor is to abolish private property!"

### **The first May 1, 1886**

On May 1, 1886, 40,000 workers took to the streets in Chicago alone. They went on strike for the 8-hour day. It was a general strike. It was a real holiday for the workers. The 1st and 2nd of May remained peaceful. On May 3, there was a clash between strikers and strikebreakers in front of the McCormick agricultural machinery factory. In the ensuing police operation, several workers were killed by the police and countless others were injured.

In response, the anarchists called for a protest rally on the Haymarket the following evening. Over 2000 people gathered. During Samuel Fielden's speech, the police began to attack the workers at the rally with sticks. In the ensuing clash, a bomb detonated in the ranks of the police. Cops fire wildly into the crowd. When they finally stop, the Haymarket is a bloodbath. They killed at least 8 workers, injured at least 50 workers and incidentally killed 7 of their own ranks.

## **Repression & Solidarity**

This was followed by waves of arrests, abuse and house searches, as well as bans on newspapers and meetings against the anarchist workers' movement. Eight anarchists were accused, although there was no evidence whatsoever.

"The law indicts anarchy! These men were put on trial instead of thousands, not because they are more guilty, but because they were their leaders. Gentlemen! Make an example of them, hang them! This is the only way to save our institutions, our social order!" This quote from the Chicago prosecution says everything about the character of the trial.

Biased jurors, tortured and bribed witnesses, a lack of evidence and the accompanying press agitation ensured that the trial became a show trial and the desired verdict was quickly reached: seven defendants were sentenced to death and one was sentenced to a long prison term. Louis Lingg ended his own life on November 10, 1887. One day later, on November 11, 1887, August Spies, Adolph Fischer, Georg Engel and Albert Parsons were finally executed. They died on the gallows after seven minutes of strangulation.

Even during the trial, the international workers' movement showed great solidarity with the prisoners. In 1889, May Day was declared an international workers' day of struggle in connection with the general strike debate in Paris. Nevertheless, the strong anarchist movement in the USA lost all meaning and the word "anarchy" has since been associated with violence and chaos by the global public. In 1893, the trial was officially declared a judicial murder and the three still imprisoned Oskar Neebe, Michael Schwab and Samuel Fielden were released.

## **Political power struggles afterwards**

Even a few years before May 1, 1886, the Marxists' lust for power was clearly visible. At the 5th Congress of the First International in Den Haag (1872), Karl Marx not only ensured that feminist forces were excluded (in his opinion, they were too committed to women's emancipation), but also Mikhail Bakunin and thus practically the entire anarchist wing. At the same congress, the powers of the General Council were extended and the individual sections were obliged to build national parties.

The story of May Day, like most things about anarchism, was always told by states and ideas of the state. Anarchism was censored, the executed anarchists were called "labor leaders". The cry "Long live anarchism!", which rang out from the gallows, went down in history as "Long live socialism!".

In July 1889, the Social Democratic/Marxist Congress, the founding congress of the Second International, met. Three things were decided there:

1. a large manifestation including a petition (8-hour day and minimum wages) to the state. (from France)
2. the day should be May 1, because the US delegations were already mobilizing for this day. (from the USA)
3. "The workers of the various nations must organize the demonstration in the manner prescribed by the circumstances of their country." (from Germany)

The third paragraph is an indirect precautionary measure against the general strike and, in fact, against any offensive action on May Day. A few months later, the German Social Democrats stated in their appeal for May Day: "In particular, there has been no talk of work being halted on May Day 1890. Had such a view

been expressed, it would have met with determined opposition, as would the proposal to organize a general strike, which proposal was opposed by the German side and rejected by the Congress.” The general strike was rejected because “either the entire proletariat is not yet in possession of powerful organizations and coffers, in which case it cannot carry out the general strike, or it is already organized powerfully enough, in which case it does not need the general strike.”

Ironically, the decision of the congress was seen by workers and political opponents in Germany as an indirect call to strike. Ten Berlin Social Democrats attempted to coordinate the workers in Germany and define various action plans. Criticism from the party leadership came primarily not because of the content, but because of the fact that the ten Berliners were acting on their own initiative, which was a “serious violation of party discipline”: “What is to become of the party if the comrades of any place, if any group of comrades can take the leadership of the party into their own hands as they see fit? That would be pure anarchy.”

However, the German Social Democrats were so busy with their election campaign that they completely missed the May Day movement - they were now the strongest party in the Reichstag. They felt vindicated in their legalistic tactics and from then on no longer dreamed of a social revolution, but of seizing political power through parliamentary majorities. (At the congress of the Second International in Zurich in 1893, the term “social revolution” had to be changed to “social transformation” at the request of the German delegation).

As we know social democracy today, it was the same 135 years ago: The announced “petition storm” failed to materialize: They only managed 300,000

signatures throughout the German Reich. They successfully prevented the general strike (with the exception of Hamburg).

May Day 1890 also had an impact on the trade union movement. Up to this point, it was customary for strikes to be called not by the trade unions (only skilled men), but by the general assembly of all those affected by a strike (including women, unskilled workers, etc.). After the employers' side tried to break the unions, they installed so-called "central associations". This implied the loss of local strike autonomy and thus eliminated the direct democratic approach of local strike assemblies.

The trade unionists who opposed centralist organizational structures and relied on the "free solidarity" of autonomous groups were unable to assert themselves in the trade union movement. The "Free Association of German Trade Unions" they founded turned to anarcho-syndicalism from 1910 onwards.



## **1<sup>st</sup> of May in recent years**

Again and again, governments brutally counter May Day demonstrations with repression. The last few years have again shown how vehemently attempts are made to break up revolutionary demonstrations and to punish and make examples of a few individuals. The state's motivation behind this is clear: to use so much violence against any attempt to bring down capitalism. The earlier and more aggressively the protest is nipped in the bud, the better for any state.

One example from recent years alone is Vienna 2021: a civilian cop (who was identified as a fascist by some anti-fascists) escalated the situation when he attacked demonstrators with pepper spray on the fringes of the final rally. When the people fought back, the robo-cops were already ready to strike. For the most part, the state force stormed the Votivpark out of nowhere and arrested 11 people.

The comrades in Paris are beaten up and locked up by cops practically every year. Around 50 people were arrested in 2022. In Istanbul (where protests on 8<sup>th</sup> of March and 1<sup>st</sup> of May are banned), a total of around 160 people were arrested in 2022.

In Berlin in 2021, state violence also escalated, injuring and arresting several hundred people. We then hear from the German Greens that “setting fire to barricades and violently attacking police officers is criminal and in no way acceptable”. Anyone who does this is acting “against the democratic consensus and weakens the cause of the peaceful demonstrations that also took place on May Day”.

Protests in Berlin have been known for massive street clashes since the 1970s. Department stores were burned down, people looted and the “black bloc”

grew ever larger. The dissatisfaction of the working class can be clearly felt! The city of Berlin fought back with tried and tested, social democratic means: they organized a huge, traditional, consumer-oriented street festival, the "MyFest". There, people can get drunk on alcohol and entertainment on the streets of Kreuzberg and Neukölln. Leaving anger behind and "celebrating together". And it works. A "counter pole" was created to the still stable demonstrations against oppression. The peaceful, well-behaved citizens and the evil, violent antifas. The colorful, friendly consumer festival and the "black bloc".

The strategy of the state authorities is always the same: "We have to avoid the black bloc". The "black bloc" is dangerous and ready to use violence. "The Antifa" is dangerous and ready to use violence. This propaganda has been going on for a very long time and very successfully. The fact that we are all only dangerous to the oppressors is and has been successfully swept under the carpet. To protect this narrative, the May Day protests and riots all over the world are always a reason for the authorities to use massive violence.

## Today

The working conditions of today in so-called Austria are clearly different to those of 140 years ago. However, regardless of cosmetic improvements, the basic structures of exploitation have always been the same over the years. A state of affairs that has not been questioned since the radical workers' movement sank into insignificance thanks to reformist powers. Today, discussions about 5% more or less pay dominate labor disputes. The hierarchically structured trade unions offer no solutions but have themselves become part of the capitalist logic of exploitation. Ultimately, only symptoms are being treated - a fundamental critique of the causes and dreaming of a utopia beyond capitalist conditions is not taking place in the general public.

We must not give up the fight, no matter how hopeless and tiring it may seem. We must continue. This world needs resistance where capital seems to be overpowering. This is where our fight is necessary and we must not let up in order to get closer to our utopia. In small steps, with many setbacks, but unstoppable!

We call on all people to take their lives into their own and collective hands instead of handing over responsibility to politicians and functionaries in elections.

Long live anarchism!

It is up to us anarchists to turn the voices of our comrades into an organized force that will dig the grave of the capitalist class - which has stolen our lives!

