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May Day, Mayday!

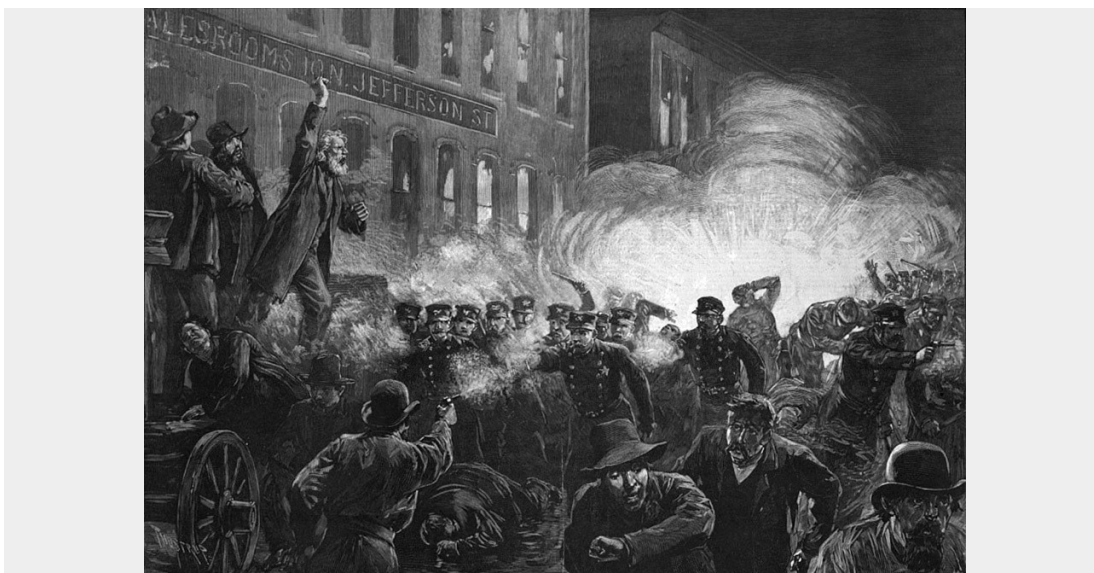


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The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.

* Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, 1848

If the United States were not plagued by Orwellian, capital-induced amnesia regarding its own labor and sociopolitical history, much of the nation would have recoiled in historical

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disgust when Donald Trump designated May First – May Day – as the date for the premature “re-opening of America.”

It’s terrible that Trump wants to send tens of millions of Americans back to work before COVID-19 has ceased to pose grave health risks within and beyond workplaces and shopping centers.

Red May Day

Unbeknownst to Trump (in all likelihood), picking May First as his target added rich historical insult to injury. May Day has been the real international and American Labor and Working-Class holiday ever since the great U.S. Eight Hour strikes and marches of May 1st, 1886. Headquartered in industrial Chicago, the Eight Hour Movement was dedicated to the notion that working people need and deserve enough leisure beyond the supervision of their capitalist bosses to enjoy balanced and healthy lives and to participate meaningfully in the nation’s much ballyhooed “democracy.” The Eight Hour struggle’s leaders were radical militants who shared young Karl Marx and Frederick Engels’ idea that the capitalist profits system would either be overthrown and replaced with socialism by the proletariat or give rise to the “common ruin” of all.

The 1886 struggle ended with the Haymarket bomb, a giant wave of anti-union repression, and the brutal execution of four top radical leaders – the Haymarket Martyrs. May 1st been labor and the Left’s special historical day – celebrated by workers, radicals, and laborites the world over – ever since. It ought to be understood as deeply offensive for Trump to try to please his fellow right-wing capitalists and his deluded white-nationalist minions by trying to order millions of people back into hazardous working conditions on that day of the year.

Green May Day

But that’s not all. May Day has different and older, “green” roots in a time-honored pagan celebration of nature’s beauty and fertility amid spring’s full flowering in northern temperate zones. Dating to ancient Rome, this naturalist May Day is rooted in the seasonal rhythms of Mother Earth and agriculture. It reached across the Atlantic with the European conquest of what became known as the Americas. It is a day of leisure, to be spent outdoors, dancing and wearing flowers and soaking up the wind and sun. While rooted in custom, it was an official holiday in the British Tudor monarchy by at least the

early 16th century. (The bourgeois-revolutionary Puritan Parliaments of 1649-1660 suspended the holiday, which was reinstated with the restoration of Charles II.)

Red and Green Common Ground

It is not hard to imagine the ancient green May Day merging with the modern red and proletarian May Day. “Eight Hours for What We Will,” union banners proclaimed in 1886. “For what we will” included time out of doors, in the free-flowing presence of nature, beyond the dirty, dangerous and depressing mills, mines and factories of Dickensian and Gilded Age capitalism—and away from the rigid “time-work discipline” (a term coined by British historian E.P. Thompson) imposed by despotic employers in what Marx called “the hidden abode of production.” It was an era when many, perhaps most, wage-earners retained connections to pre-industrial and more communalist and rural ways of life.

The workers’ movements of 19th century North America drew on the rolling, recurrently immigration-fed tension between the more naturally embedded and pre-industrial agricultural and artisanal ways of life on one hand and the authoritarian, speeded-up and nonstop “jungle” (detailed by American author Upton Sinclair) of industrial capitalist “modernity” on the other.

One delicious connection is that the eight-hour-day struggle in Chicago was particularly focused on the city’s McCormick Harvesting Machine Co. plant, manufacturer of a farm technology that famously displaced millions of laborers from agricultural work while helping industrialize the North American and global countryside.

Consistent with this melding of the red and green May Days, “modern” capitalism assaulted nature and created the wage-dependent proletariat at one and the same time through the long enclosure of “the commons.” The commons are the vast swaths of land, stream and forest in which pre-capitalist people found sustenance, insulating them from having to rent out their labor power to capitalists to garner the money required to purchase life’s necessities as commodities. As the brilliant left historian Peter Linebaugh notes in his book “Stop Thief!” “A single term, ‘the commons,’ expresses, first, that which the working class lost when subsistence resources were taken away, and, second, the idealized visions of liberté, égalité, fraternité,”

Rooted in a vast human history that long predated the ascendancy of “the commodity with its individualism and privatization,” the commons, Linebaugh writes, “is antithetical to capital.” The Protestant radical group known as Diggers and others with roots in the

village commons who opposed capital's rise to supremacy understood that "expropriation leads to exploitation, the Haves and the Have Nots."

The Diggers, the first modern communists, were led by Gerrard Winstanley. They sought to pre-empt the coming new soulless wage, money and commodity slavery of the capitalist order (the bourgeois regime that Marx and Engels would justly accuse of "resolv[ing] personal worth into exchange value") by claiming earth as "a common treasury for all." Writing as England was becoming the first fully capitalist nation where most of the adult working-age population toiled for wages, Winstanley and his followers practiced what Linebaugh calls "commoning," the merging of "labor" and "natural resources" in the spirit of "all for one and one for all."

"The Most Dangerous Criminal in Human History"

Trump has insulted the green May Day as well the related red and proletarian one. His ruthless shredding of environmental regulations, recently escalated under the cover of COVID-19, is a frontal assault on livable ecology. The fossil-fuel-mad president of the United States seems hellbent on the doing everything he can to turn the planet into a giant Greenhouse Gas Chamber. In the name of economic recovery, Trump has granted American corporations an "open license to pollute." As CBS reported three weeks ago, "The Trump administration introduced a sweeping relaxation of environmental laws and fines during the coronavirus pandemic. According to new guidelines from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), companies will largely be exempt from consequences for polluting the air or water during the outbreak."

Last week, Trump's EPA announced that it would weaken controls on the release of mercury and other toxic metals from oil and coal-powered plants.

It's with Trump's frankly ecocidal agenda in mind above all that our leading intellectual, Noam Chomsky has recently and properly identified Trump as "the most dangerous criminal in human history" – as a person wielding the most powerful office in world history to bring about the end of a decent and organized human existence. Adolph Hitler's goal, Chomsky notes, "was to rid the German-run world of Jews, Roma, homosexuals and other 'deviants,' along with tens of millions of Slav 'Untermenschen.' But [unlike Trump,] Hitler was not dedicated with fervor to destroying the prospects of organized human life on Earth in the not-distant future [along with millions of other species."

Mayday! Mayday!

The 20th Century brought a third meaning to the phrase “Mayday.” I am referring to what a pilot says into his radio as her plane plummets to earth: “Mayday! Mayday! Mayday!”

It is environmental “Mayday” indeed for humanity under the command of capital and far-right authoritarian lunatics like Trump and Jair Bolsonaro these days. “Spaceship Earth” is on exterminist path that is rapidly accelerating, as the latest findings on melting Arctic ice cover, rising global temperature, ocean acidification, species die-offs. and looming permafrost release regularly tell us. The capitalogenic COVID-19 crisis – a consequence of capital’s relentless quest for accumulation and profit – is just one among many eco-exterminist symptoms, many worse than even a virulent pandemic in the ever-shortening “long term.”

If the current environmental trajectory is not significantly reversed (and one silver lining in the COVID-19 nightmare is the drastic reduction of carbon emissions and other forms of capitalist pollution), the left’s long-standing struggle for equality and democracy is reduced to a debate over how to more equitably share a poisoned pie. Who wants to “turn the world upside down” (Winstanley’s phrase) only to find out that it is a steaming pile of overheated toxic and pathogen-ridden waste?

If the Earth celebrated by the Green May Day is irreversibly poisoned in a capital-imposed environmental and epidemiological Mayday!, then the radical social justice and democracy sought by friends of the Red May Day becomes sadly beside the point. The “common ruin of the contending classes” will have trumped the “revolutionary reconstitution of society-at-large,” rendering it obsolete.

Postscript

Here is one of the smartest calls to action I have ever read – from Cooperation Jackson last March 31st: “A Call to Action: Toward a May 1st General Strike to End the COVID 19 Crisis and Create a New World.” Please read it and then act on its call:

“We must stop the worst most deadly version of this pandemic from becoming a reality, and we have to ensure that we never return to the society that enabled this pandemic to emerge and have the impact it is having in the first place. We must do everything that we can to create a new, just, equitable and ecologically regenerative economy. “

“The question is how? To fight back we have to use the greatest power we have at our disposal – our collective labor. We can shut the system down to break the power of the state and capitalist class. We must send a clear message that things cannot and will not go back to normal. In order to do this, we need to call for collective work and shopping

stoppages, leading to a general strike that is centered around clear, comprehensive demands. We must make demands that will transform our broken and inequitable society, and build a new society run by and for us – the working class, poor, oppressed majority. “

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