

THE FESTIVAL OF LABOUR AND THE PEOPLE'S DAY

by
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To understand the significance of May-Day to the labour movement, it is necessary to give the decision of The Second Socialist International Congress in 1889 some historical context and to trace the development and importance of May 1st subsequently. To put the same idea in another way, it is my personal view that our present time is akin to 150-180 years ago.

The industrial revolution took place during the latter part of the 18th century and most of the 19th century. The revolution was based on mechanical inventions which de-skilled work and increased productivity. This was accompanied by a change from a basically rural atmosphere to an urban one. In 1800, 85% of people were engaged in agriculture - today it is less than 3%. This led to men, women and children being seen as units of production, and with the growth of factories, the necessity for workers to speak with one voice - the union.

During this same period, revolution was very much in the air. American independence was gained in 1775, the French revolution was in 1789 and almost every European country had some form of revolt or full scale revolution by 1848. It was in the

midst of this swirl of events and massive social change that industrial May-Day was born. It was a bloody birth and as the miners' strike shows, when organised labour challenges employers and authority, it still is.

It was in 1848, at the height of the unrest, that Karl Marx's 'The Communist Manifesto' was first published. While written and printed in London, the first edition was in German. The English version was published two years later. Marx was essentially a prophet and the separation of myth from reality is very difficult to grasp and also liable to be misunderstood. His essential views were widely held at the time, and in view of the importance that is now given to them it is vital to briefly summarise them.

He argued that class struggles were endemic in social history; the oppressor and the oppressed. He also argued that the ruling ideas of the time were those of the ruling class. He was very concerned with the situation that he saw happening. This he saw as the domination of the workers by the bourgeoisie or capitalists. This domination destroyed the personal worth of the individual by making it into an

exchange value - making them wage slaves. This applied to doctors and lawyers as well as factory workers.

He saw the bourgeoisie as utterly selfish and corrupting in their influence. He also saw them as a self destructing class to be superseded by the proletarians; who once in power would abolish private property, private capital and finally the necessity for a class system. Hence Utopia.

One of his most powerful concepts was 'Dialectical Materialism'. This derived from the philosopher Hegel. The basic idea is that there is an idea or thesis which produces its contradiction or antithesis. The conflict leads to a synthesis which is then the new thesis. And so on. Unlike Hegel, Marx argued that this derived from the material circumstances existing at the time. Material including socio-economic reality. One other point needs to be stressed which was his view of communists. They were of the proletariat, though possibly including defecting bourgeoisie, and differed only in their ability to see the international aspect and the forward march of the struggle.

At the Second Socialist International Congress in 1889, many political and union groups were represented but as far as I can trace no communists or delegates from Britain. A Frenchman, Lavigne, who had organised strikes in February with some success, decided that an international day was needed and proposed it. As the American unions

had decided, following bloody battles with authority, to hold a strike on May 1st, this was the day selected for 1890. The day was duly celebrated in many countries and with considerable harrassment from police and military.

Britain for some strange reason chose May 4th and an estimated 200,000 workers assembled in Hyde Park. Unionisation had been growing space in the preceeding few years. It was estimated that the Miners Federation went from 36,000 in 1888 to 96,000 in 1889. It is interesting to note that Robert Owen, a wealthy social reformer, had announced May 1st 1833 as the start of the millenium, a period of happiness and benign government; a point I shall return to later.

What it does seem important to stress is that the day was not only concerned with achieving an eight-hour day but demonstrating the power of the people to act for themselves against authority and employers but also for world peace through their own efforts.

The International Congress of 1891 affirmed that May-Day was to be an annual event held internationally. There was much discussion at this congress and subsequently about the importance of the particular day and whether it should be militant. The view seemed to emerge that it was a day selected by the people for the people and if necessary strike action should be taken. One realistic sceptic went so far as to say that if it was a holiday, there would be a

tendency for members just to enjoy the illuminations, dance in the streets and drink in the public bars. For many at that time, and today, the day is one for workers to challenge the capitalist system.

Both America and Canada celebrate Labor Day on the first Monday of September while most of Europe and

Communist countries celebrate on May 1st.

So we will celebrate May-Day on Wednesday May 1st. It is 93 years since it was first celebrated as a day of the people seeking peace, security and a fair share of the goodies. It is also 159 years into the millenium proclaimed by Robert Owen. People of the world unite . . . ?

Acknowledgements: Trades Union Congress Library. Labour Research Department.

Sources: The Origin of the First of May by L.O. Froissard. Origins - MAY DAY by Judy Brown. The Meaning of May-Day by Labour Research Department. The Communist Manifesto. Marx Engels. Pelican.
