The real origins of May Day

May Day has been a public holiday in the UK since 1978. But its real origins lie in the great struggles in America by working people for shorter working hours at the end of the 19th century, and the martyrdom of union leaders executed 130 years ago.

The centre of the movement for an eight-hour working day was Chicago, where some factories imposed an 18-hour day. An eight-hour law had actually been passed by the US Congress in 1868. However, over the next 15 years, it was enforced only twice.

But over that same period workers began to take matters into their own hands. For example, in 1872 100,000 workers in New York struck and won an eight-hour day, mostly for building workers.

In the autumn of 1885, a leading union, the Knights of Labor, announced rallies and demonstrations for the following May - on the slogan of “eight hours for work, eight hours for rest, eight hours for what we will.”

Their radicalism and success in key railroad strikes had led to membership growth. From 20,000 in 1880, the Knights of Labor grew to 100,000 in 1885. In 1886 they mushroomed to nearly 800,000. The capitalists were increasingly frightened at the prospect of widespread strikes.

On 1 May 1886, the first national general strike in American history took place, with 500,000 involved in demonstrations across the country. As a direct consequence, tens of thousands saw their hours of work substantially reduced - in many cases down to an eight-hour day with no loss in pay.

The employers lost no time in executing their revenge. The New York Sun, as direct as its modern British namesake, advocated “a diet of lead for hungry strikers!”

Two days later, on 3 May, 500 police herded 300 scabs through a picket line at the Chicago factory of farm machinery firm International Harvester. When the pickets resisted, the police opened fire and several workers died.

Haymarket

A protest meeting was organised for the following evening in Haymarket Square. Towards its end, in the pouring rain, with only a couple of hundred workers left, the police arrived to break it up.

The meeting had been orderly, but suddenly a bomb was thrown into the ranks of the police. Seven officers were killed and 66 injured. The police turned their guns on the workers, wounding most of the demonstrators, and killing several. It was never established who threw the bomb - an “anarchist”, or a police “agent provocateur”. At the subsequent trial of the union leaders the prosecution said it was irrelevant, and the judge agreed.

Police raids rounded up hundreds of union activists throughout the country. Eight union leaders were put on trial. Seven of them had not been at the demonstration and the eighth was the speaker on the platform, so none of them could have thrown the bomb.

Legality was never the aim of that trial; revenge was. The Chicago Tribune of the day gave the game away with the headline: “Hang an organiser from every lamp-post!”

The trial began on 21 June. Instead of choosing a jury by picking names from a box - the normal method - it was rigged by a special bailiff, nominated by the prosecutor. He ensured the jury was made up of “such men as the prosecutor wants” - a practice echoed by today’s jury selection in Ireland’s Jobstown protest trial!

On 19 August that jury duly returned a verdict of guilty. Before sentence was formally announced, the defendants were allowed to make statements.

One of the eight, August Spies, a leader of the anarchist International Working People’s Association, made a powerful speech: “Your Honour,” he began, “in addressing this court I speak as the representative of one class to the representative of another...

“If you think that by hanging us you can stamp out the labour movement... the movement from which the downtrodden millions, the millions who toil in want and misery expect salvation - if this is your opinion, then hang us!”

“Here you will tread upon a spark, but there and there, behind you - and in front of you, and everywhere, flames blaze up. It is a subterranean fire. You cannot put it out.”

On 11 November 1887, four of the union leaders were executed.

International protests followed. Huge meetings were addressed in England and Wales by Eleanor Marx, George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde and William Morris. 200,000 people in Chicago lined the streets for the funerals.

Day of solidarity

From that day on, 1 May has grown to an international day of solidarity among working people.

In 1889, the founding meeting in Paris of what became known as the Second International passed a resolution calling for a “great international demonstration” to take place the following year. The call was a resounding success.

On 1 May 1890, May Day demonstrations took place in the United States and most countries in Europe.

Friedrich Engels joined half a million workers in Hyde Park in London on 3 May, and reported: “As I write these lines, the working class of Europe and America is holding a review of its forces; it is mobilised for the first time as one army, under one flag, and fighting for one immediate aim: an eight-hour working day.”

As workers have emerged from tyranny and repression in whatever country, they have adopted May Day as theirs. Its true history will unfold a powerfully inspiring story of socialists, as it has done so often in the past.

Every year on May Day, the Socialist prints messages of solidarity from across the workers’ movement. This year, we have a record 99 greetings across ten pages, raising over £5,200 for socialist ideas.

Dave Nellist
Socialist Party national committee

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May Day 2017 pull-out - an introduction to May Day plus ten pages of greetings

Engraving of the Haymarket protest meeting and its bloody conclusion after police attacked
May Day greetings from PCS Left Unity NEC comrades

- Fighting to defend members and protect vital public services
- Janice Godrich, PCS president

Socialist Party members on the PCS DWP group executive

Send May Day greetings to the Socialist Party - re-energize the working class
- React to a fighting socialist Left Unity leadership

So that we can continue to fight to:
- Stop austerity
- Stop attacks on jobs and services
- Stop the DWP offices closures
- Build the campaign for the alternative and for a fair, supportive and properly resourced social security system

Fraunhothenhe Dave Burke
Janice Godrich
John McDonald
Sian Rasteb

May Day greetings from the POA NEC

Fraternal May Day Greetings from the POA NEC

Mike Rolfe national chair
Steve Gillan general secretary

Socialist Party members on the NSSN steering committee send May Day greetings

- Support the struggle - Balil the Tories

The Phulbari Solidarity Group

Solidarity with the garment workers of Bangladesh who have green activists
- in their fight to save the Sundarbans and environment from government sponsored corporations
- Deep condolences to the family of Tania Sohail - the morning of massive numbers of workers forced to work. They are our brothers and sisters.
- The Phulbari Solidarity Group

Socialist Party members in Equity

May Day greetings to artists and culture workers around the world

- End unpaid and low-paid work for a living wage in the arts
- Fight for socialism!

Lee Armstrong
Neil Gore
Charles Hendren
James Ivens
Adan James
Julian Moore-Cook

Socialist students

Socialist greetings to students

Mike May Day greetings 2017

Swansea and District NUJ sends May Day greetings.

Standing up for local news and journalists.
You can’t have local news without local journalists!

Solidarity greetings from Usdaw

Building a Broad Left challenge in Usdaw to ‘partnership’ policies
- For shop workers’ rights not retailers’ profits

NUJ

Swansea and District NUJ sends May Day greetings.

Solidarity with the NUJ members in the postal and telecommunications industries

Dave Sample
Sarah Spencer
Carrie-Anne Watkins
Katherine Williams

May Day greetings from Swansea Trades Council

In memory of our comrade Bernard Room, long-time Trades Council secretary, CWU activist and Socialist Party member.

‘Firm in principle, flexible in tactics’

Socialist Party members in the RMT send May Day greetings to transport workers around the world

Solidarity greetings from the RMT

- Workers of the world unite!
- Solidarity with the oppressed - No to war and racism!

Socialist students

Socialist greetings to the labour and trade union movement around the world
We pledge to continue to provide an efficient service of all publications in print
See our website or send for printed lists

leftbooks.co.uk
PO Box 24697, London E11 1YD
Phone 020 8988 8789

Solidarity from Usdaw Activist - Socialist Party members in Usdaw

Socialist Party branch in Austell, County Meath, Ireland.

Solidarity from Usdaw Activist - Socialist Party members in Usdaw

Socialist Party branch in Newport, Gwent.
Bracknell Unite members send May Day Greetings to socialists everywhere!

- Solidarity with all those internationally fighting capitalist austerity, racism and war
- Celebrate the Bolshevik victory of 1917 and build a mass party for worldwide socialism!
- From Socialist Party members and supporters in Aylesbury, Basingstoke, Bracknell, Isle of Wight, Oxford, Reading, Portsmouth, Southampton and Staines

Southern

- May Day greetings from Hull NUT
- Teachers of the world unite
- You have nothing to lose but your workload

- Fraternal greetings and solidarity with the Jobstown defendants - GMB Beverley branch

May Day greetings from Hull TUC

- Victory to the Jobstown protesters
- Victory to workers in struggle everywhere

NUT

- May Day greetings from Hull NUT
- Teachers of the world unite
- You have nothing to lose but your workload

- Fraternal greetings and solidarity with the Jobstown defendants - GMB Beverley branch

GMB

- Victory to the Jobstown protesters
- Victory to workers in struggle everywhere

GMB@Work

- Unite the Union from Hull GLO25
- Direct employment for all construction workers
- No to bogus self-employment
- Defend and expand ‘NAECI’ our national agreement

May Day greetings from Southampton City Councillor Keith Morrell

- Defend local authority services and jobs!

Leeds University and Beckett Socialist Students

- May Day greetings from Southampron City Councillor Keith Morrell

- Defend local authority services and jobs!

Friends of Leeds Labour

- Greetings to the Socialist
- For a democratic, anti-austerity Labour Party

No ifs no buts

- Let’s fight the education cuts
- Socialist Students at Solent, Southampton, Portsmouth, Reading and Oxford universities

Bracknell Unite members send May Day Greetings to socialists everywhere!

- South Yorkshire Freedom Riders
- Fighting for free local train travel for everyone over 60

YOUTH FIGHT FOR JOBS

- May Day greetings from Yorkshire Youth Fight for Jobs
- A new generation of struggle
- For a £10 an hour nationwide wage
- For the workers’ movement

Greetings from Calderdale Trade Union Council
Comradely greetings from all reps and activists at Greenwich Unite branch 1/2050, fighting for jobs and services in Greenwich and in solidarity with all of our brothers and sisters in struggle everywhere.

Workers of the world can do it again!

In 1917 Russian workers and peasants

We say:

- Decent homes for all!
- Defend the NHS
- Stop the attacks on the unemployed!
- Don't let the racists divide us!
- Decent homes for all!
- Stop the attacks on the unemployed!
- Don't let the racists divide us!
- Jobs for all!
- Free education for all!
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Solidarity greetings to workers worldwide from North West Socialist Party

May Day greetings from Liverpool 47 group of socialist councillors 1983-87

Who still stand as a magnificent example to those Labour councillors who carry out every cut demanded by the Tories. We refused to cut and fought back successfully for resources which Thatcher had stolen from Liverpool. We call on Jeremy Corbyn to empower the membership to deselected right-wing MPs and call on Labour councillors to vote against cuts.

Our record includes:
- 5,000 new houses built
- 6 new sports centres
- 2,000 new jobs and existing jobs saved
- 600 million won back from the Tories

We say NO to the capitalist EU and YES to solidarity of the European working class.

May Day greetings from Medway TUC branch NW/127404 Merseyside Civil Engineering

"Fighting for better terms and conditions in the construction sector"
"Against bogus self employment, umbrella companies and blacklisting"

solidarity greetings from the Socialist Party's South East region - Brighton, Medway, Canterbury, Folkestone and Dover

Socialist greetings from the Socialist Party's South East region - Brighton, Medway, Canterbury, Folkestone and Dover

May Day greetings from Unite branch NW/127404 Merseyside Civil Engineering

"Fighting for better terms and conditions in the construction sector"
"Against bogus self employment, umbrella companies and blacklisting"

May Day greetings from Salford Against The Cuts

Labour: we need anti-austerity actions as well as words!

Solidarity greetings from Salford TUSC

Fighting Cuts and Supporting Workers in Struggle

Pendleton Students Collective, Salford

Sends May Day greetings to students and workers everywhere

Solidarity greetings to all those fighting austerity from Merseyside Pensioners' Association

Greetings to all those fighting poverty, racism, imperialism and oppression. Oppose all benefit cuts and attacks on the employed and unemployed. We say:

"Oppose all attacks on claimants, disabled people and the low-paid"
"No to privatisation and PFI"
"No to imperialism's wars"
"Fighting poverty amidst plenty"
"For international socialism"

Bill North - chairperson
Andy Richards - secretary
Tony Greenstein - treasurer

4 Crestway Parade, The Crestway, Brighton BN1 7BL, 01273 540 717

May Day greetings from Salford City Union

Send May Day greetings to trade unionists everywhere

Campaigning for legal no-cuts budgets

May Day greetings from Pendleton Students Collective, Salford

Happy May Day from Unison members who read the Socialist in Coventry - fight for socialism!

May Day greetings from the West Midlands region of the Socialist Party

RMT Birmingham rail branch sends greetings to all workers fighting to protect and improve their jobs, pay and conditions. Full support to the guards and drivers who are fighting to keep the guard on the train. Solidarity!

May Day greetings from RMT Birmingham rail branch

Preston Emigrant Celtic Supporters Club

Support the RMT - GUARD GUARANTEED

Preston Emigrant Celtic Supporters Club

Send solidarity greetings to all trade unionists and socialists

Bolton Trades Council 1866-2016

Bolton Trades Council sends May Day greetings to trade unionists everywhere.

Fight austerity! Save the NHS!
In the centenary year of the great Russian revolution we send May Day greetings to all sections of the CWI and to the workers of the world.

We echo Lenin’s words upon his arrival in Petrograd in April 1917: “There is one, and only one, kind of internationalism in deed; working wholeheartedly for the development of the revolutionary movement and the revolutionary struggle in one’s own country and supporting (by propaganda, sympathy and material aid) such and only such a struggle and such a line in every country without exception.”

We remain guided by Trotsky’s approach that: “It is not enough for a revolutionist to have correct ideas. Correct ideas have already been set down in Capital and the Communist Manifesto. But that has not prevented false ideas from being broadcast. It is the task of the party to weld together the correct ideas with the mass labour movement. Only in this manner can an idea become a driving force.” (June 1934)

Fighting for workers’ rights and organising for socialism in Bristol, Gloucester, Stroud, Cheltenham, Lydney, Taunton, Swindon, Warminster, Exeter, Exmouth, Sidmouth, Torquay, Paignton, Brixham, Teignmouth, Plymouth, St. Austell, Truro, Penzance, Poole, Bournemouth and Weymouth.

Solidarity with our brothers and sisters in struggle from Socialist Party PCS members in Leicestershire.

Solidarity with PCS members.

Long live Lenin and Trotsky and the Bolsheviks as we approach the dawn of democratic socialism.

Bill and Marilyn Buchanan

Bristol South - May Day greetings

May Day greetings 2017

FIGHT AND STRIKE TOGETHER TO DEFEND OUR NHS

2017 MAY DAY GREETINGS FROM EAST MIDLANDS SOCIALIST PARTY

Solidarity with our brothers and sisters in struggle from Bristol TUSC supporters.

11 - 18 April 2013

Socialist