



THE CLASS-ORIENTED LANDMARK OF MAY DAY

The origin of May Day is linked to the struggle for the reduction of the workday, a banner that maintains its present strategy.

By Altamiro Borges*

"But, if you think that by hanging us, you can stamp out the labor movement – the movement from which the downtrodden millions, the millions who toil and live in want and misery – the wage slaves – expect salvation – if this is your opinion, then hang us! Here you will tread upon a spark, but there, and there, and behind you and in front of you, and everywhere, flames will blaze up. It is a subterranean fire. You cannot put it out." August Spies, 31, *Arbeiter Zeitung* newsletter editor

"You ask me why sentence of death should not be passed upon me. I will not talk much. I will only say that I protest against my being sentenced to death, because I have committed no crime (...) If death is the penalty for our love of the freedom of the human race, then I say openly I have forfeited my life (...) If you believe that with this barbarian verdict you will annihilate our ideas, you are sadly mistaken, because they are immortal" Adolf Fischer, 30, journalist

"Of what does my crime consist? That I have labored to bring about a system of society by which it is impossible for one to hoard millions, through the improvements in machinery, while the great masses sink to degradation and misery. As water and air are free to all, so should the inventions of scientific men be applied for the benefit of all. The statute laws we have are in opposition to the laws of nature in that they rob the great masses of their rights "to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." George Engel, 50, machine compositor.

"Do you believe that when our bodies will have been dumped in the mass grave everything will be over? Do you believe that the social war will fade away by strangling us brutally. Well you are very much mistaken. (...) Your decision, your verdict, our conviction is nothing but an arbitrary will of this lawless court that demonstrate your injustice and the social injustices that are leading us to the scaffold." Albert Parsons, fought during the American civil war.

The courageous and vehement words of these four leaders of the young labour movement of the United States were made on August 20 1886, shortly after hearing the judge's sentence condemning them to death. They gave birth to May Day, the international workers' day. In the current phase of class struggle, in which many have joined the bourgeois order and lost the perspective of Socialism, it is important to remember this milestone and honour the attitude of these class-oriented heroes of the proletariat. The saga serves as a reference to those who struggle to overcome capitalist barbarism.

The origin of May Day is linked to the struggle for the reduction of the workday, a banner which is still currently strategic. In the mid-19th century, the average workday in the USA was of 15 hours. Against this abuse, the working class, which strengthened itself with the accelerated advancement of capitalism in the country, went on to lead protests. In 1827,

the carpenters of Philadelphia performed the first strike under this 8-hour working day banner. In 1832, a strong movement organized itself in Boston, serving as a warning to the bourgeoisie. As early as 1840, the Government approves the first project for the reduction of the working day for civil servants.

General strike for the reduction of the working day

This partial victory boosted even more the struggle. Starting from 1850, the famous 8-Hour League emerged, commanding the campaign across the country and getting other achievements. In 1884, the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions of the USA and Canada, (it became later the American Federation of Labor-AFL), called a national strike to demand the reduction for all employees, "without distinction of sex, craft or age." The date that was chosen was May 1, 1886 – May was the month of most of the renovations of the collective labor contracts in the US.

The general strike exceeded the expectations, confirming that this claim had already been incorporated by the proletariat. According with the report of Camilo Taufic, in his book "Chronicle of May Day" more than 5000 factories were paralyzed and nearly 340.000 workers took to the streets to demand the reduction of the working day. Many companies, feeling the strength of the movement, gave in: 125,000 employees obtained this right on the very same day: On May 1st; the following month, another 200.000 got the same right; and before the end of the year, about 1 million workers were able to enjoy the right of working 8 hours a day.

Bullets against the strikers, says the press

But the battle was not easy. In many places, the bourgeoisie formed armed militias, composed by thugs and former prisoners. The "Pinkerton Brothers" gang became famous because of its horrifying methods used against the strikers. The Federal Government used the army to repress the workers. The bourgeois press incited the confrontation. In an editorial, the Chicago Tribune newspaper roared: "the bullet is the best food for the strikers. Prison and forced labor are the only possible solution to the social question. It is to be expected that its use will be extended".

The social polarization reached its peak in Chicago, one of the most dynamic industrial poles of the nascent capitalism in the United States. The strike, which began on the May 1st got the support of almost all the factories. Faced with the employers' intransigence, it continued during the following days. On May 4, during a protest of the strikers in Haymarket Square, a bomb exploded and killed a policeman. The conflict exploded. In total, 38 workers were killed and 115 were wounded.

The eight martyrs of Chicago

Despite the fact that the origin of the bomb was never clarified, the Government decreed a State of siege in Chicago, setting curfews and occupying militarily the workers' districts; the unions were closed and more than 300 leading strikers were arrested and tortured during interrogations. During this wave

of terror, eight leaders of the movement – August Spies, a newspaper editor and several trade unionists Adolf Fisher, George Engel, Albert Parsons, Louis Lingg, Samuel Fielden, Michael Schwab and Oscar Neebe – were arrested and brought to trial. They entered history as "the eight Martyrs of Chicago."

The trial was one of the biggest judicial farce in US history. Its only purpose was to condemn the strike movement and the anarchist leaders, who organized the protest. Nothing was confirmed about who was responsible for the bomb nor the death of the policeman. Judge Joseph Gary, appointed to conduct the court proceedings, explained his theory that the bomb was part of a global plot against the United States. The trial started on May 17, the Court selected 12 jurors among the 981 candidates; the witnesses were carefully chosen. Three strikers were bought by the Government, as it was later proven by the sister of one of them (Waller).

The biggest judicial farce of the USA

On August 20, with a crowded courtroom, the verdict was read: Spies, Fisher, Engel, Parsons, Lingg, Fielden and Schwab were sentenced to death; Neebe was sentenced to 15 years in prison. Shortly after, due to the wave of protests, Lingg, Fielden and Schwab had their sentences reduced to life imprisonment. On November 11, 1887 in Chicago, Spies, Fisher, Engel and Parsons were hanged. A day earlier, Lingg died in his cell under mysterious circumstances; the police claimed "suicide". On the same day, the five "Chicago" Martyrs were buried in a procession which gathered more than 25.000 workers. For several weeks, the proletarian region houses displayed red flowers as a sign of mourning and protest.

Six years later, the Governor of Illinois, John Altgeld, ordered to reopen the trial. The new judge concluded that those that had been hanged had not committed any crime, "they were innocent victims of a miscarriage of Justice". Fielden, Schwab and Neebe were immediately released. The death of these workers' leaders was not in vain. On May 1, 1890, the U.S. Congress established the 8-hour working day. In tribute to its heroes, in December of the same year, the AFL made May Day a national struggle day. Later, the trade union central Union, became totally corrupted and erased the date from its calendar.

In 1891, the Second International, which had been founded two years earlier and gathered workers and Socialist organisations from all around the world, decided in its Congress of Brussels that "on May 1st there will be a unique demonstration for workers of all countries and that it would be of class-struggle character, with the claim of the 8 hour day of work. From this Congress, which had the presence of 367 delegates from more than 20 countries, the international day of workers became the main reference on the calendar of all those who fight against capitalist exploitation.

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