The May Days: Stories of Courage and Resistance

Snapshots from the History of May Day

CrimethInc.

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May Day is one of the days on which anarchists celebrate self-determination and self-realization. People have lit bonfires to mark the end of winter for thousands of years; it wasn't until industrialization forcibly disconnected people from the land base that nourished them that May Day came to be observed as a labor holiday. At base, May Day isn't about labor: it's about abundance. It's about excess, pleasure, freedom—the burgeoning source of life itself. As a millennia-old holy day honoring the return of spring, May Day directs our thoughts to nature—a wild and beautiful chaos that flows through us and nourishes us, which we can enjoy but never control. Our joyous acts of rebellion do not point to a world in which workers are paid a little better for their labor, but to the possibility that we could sweep away all the forms of oppression that stand between us and the tremendous potential of our lives.

Here follow a few recent exciting moments in the centuries-old legacy of May Day. All the best in your own efforts today: as the folk singer croons, "To fight for something is to make it your own."

Before May Day: 1871, 1877, 1884

Before May Day became the international day to celebrate labor struggles, workers and other rebels observed March 18, the anniversary of the beginning of the Paris Commune in 1871.

For example, on March 18, 1877, the young Peter Kropotkin joined Pindy, Stepniak, and anarchists from all around Switzerland for a march in Bern. Kropotkin is largely remembered as a peaceable advocate of science and mutual aid, but he and his friends brought flagpoles, brass knuckles, and other weapons to defend themselves. After a lengthy street confrontation, they managed to rescue their red flag from police who tried to seize it, and proceeded to a 2000-strong meeting at which they recited speeches, sang revolutionary songs, and read out telegrams of encouragement from France and Spain.

Meeting in Chicago on October 7, 1884, the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions resolved to demand that the workday be limited to eight hours by May Day 1886. The leadership of this organization, which later became the American Federation of Labor (AFL), secretly issued a statement advising members not to become involved in the movement around this demand, but the rank and file embraced it in large numbers.

1886

The anarchist organizers Albert and Lucy Parsons led 80,000 people down Chicago's Michigan Avenue in the first modern May Day Parade, chanting, "Eight-hour day with no cut in pay!" Over the next few days, 350,000 workers around the US went on strike at 1200 factories, including 70,000 in Chicago, 45,000 in New York, and 32,000 in Cincinnati.

Four days later, the police attacked a labor rally in Chicago, someone responded by throwing a bomb, and the rest is history.

Albert Parsons and four other anarchists lost their lives in the ensuing show trial, which was so widely regarded as rigged and unjust that in 1893 the governor overturned the convictions and criticized the court proceedings. Lucy Parsons, later a co-founder of the Industrial Workers of the World, dedicated herself to a life of revolutionary organizing.

1891

Determined to avenge the Haymarket martyrs and build a revolutionary movement capable of abolishing capitalism and the state, the seasoned anarchist organizer Errico Malatesta secretly returned to Italy in order to prepare fierce demonstrations for May Day.

On the afternoon of May 1, 1891, thousands of workers gathered in the plaza of Santa Croce in Rome to hear a series of speakers. A march of thousands more soon arrived, including members of the anarchist federation with red-trimmed banners. As the police chief noted, "The appearance of the Federazione Anarchica stimulated immediate excitement in the crowd."

The anarchist Amilcare Cipriani, who had been condemned to death and then exiled to New Caledonia as punishment for acting as Chief of Staff during the defense of the Paris Commune, rose to speak. Noting the forest of bayonets with which hundreds of soldiers and mounted cavalry had surrounded the plaza, Cipriani pleaded for calm, arguing that it was not the proper time to confront the authorities. Yet an unscheduled speaker, the anarchist Galileo Palla who had lived in exile in Argentina with Malatesta, leapt onto the rostrum and exhorted to the crowd to rise in revolt, concluding, "Long live the revolution!"

The ensuing riots spread throughout the city and lasted well into the night.

1894

Massive rioting swept Cleveland, Ohio on May Day 1894 in protest against unemployment stemming from the economic crisis of the previous year. The Pullman Strike began a few days later, on May 11, culminating with countrywide disruptions and the murders of many workers by police and other mercenaries.

In response, President Grover Cleveland announced that Labor Day in September would become a national holiday, attempting to coopt workers' struggles without affirming the anniversary of the Haymarket incident. Samuel Gompers, a founder of the AFL and a virulent opponent of immigration, anarchism, socialism, and, later, the Industrial Workers of the World, supported the federal government in crushing the Pullman Strike and backed Grover Cleveland's effort to undermine the momentum of May Day. Make no mistake: the official leadership of legalized labor organizations has largely aimed to tame and hobble them from the very beginning.

1909

Two labor rallies were announced for May Day 1909 in Buenos Aires. One was organized by the socialist General Union of Workers (UGT); the other, by the anarchist Argentine Regional Workers' Federation (FORA).

As anarchist historian Osvaldo Bayer recounts, "After noon, the Plaza Lorea began to fill with folk not habitués of the city: lots of mustaches, berets, neckerchiefs, patched trousers, lots of fair hair, lots of freckled faces, lots of Italians, lots of 'Russians' (as the Jewish immigrant was called in those days) and quite a few Catalans. Along came the anarchists with their red flags: 'Death to the bourgeois! War on the bourgeoisie!' were the first cries heard."

The rowdiest crew seemed to be the anarchists from the association "Luz al Soldado" ("enlighten the soldier"). According to the day's police report, they wrecked trams, liberated horses from city cabs, and smashed bakeries that refused to shutter their storefronts in observance of the workers' holiday.

Unexpectedly, police chief Colonel Ramón Falcón drew up in his vehicle and gave the order to attack. Police cracked heads, shot demonstrators, and trampled them on horseback, killing as many as 11 workers and seriously injuring dozens more.

Socialists joined the anarchists in calling for an open-ended general strike demanding Falcón's resignation. The Colonel responded with arrests and raids and shut down the anarchist press. On May 4, 33 years to the day after the Haymarket incident, a crowd of up to 80,000 gathered to accompany their martyrs' remains to the cemetery. Falcón's police showed up again to beat and shoot at the bereaved.

One of the anarchists impacted by the May Day massacre was a Ukrainian-born teenager, Simon Radowitzky. Six months later, Radowitzky used a homemade bomb to blow up Falcón's carriage, killing the Colonel and his secretary Juan Lartigau. When finally caught and beaten by police, he shouted, "Viva el anarquismo!" Radowitzky became one of the most prominent political prisoners in Argentinian history.

1919

Riots broke out again in Cleveland, Ohio when reactionaries and police attacked a May Day parade of union members, anarchists, and socialists protesting the imprisonment of Eugene Debs, a labor organizer who had cut his teeth in the Pullman Strike decades earlier.

1937

On May Day, 1937, Emma Goldman spoke in Hyde Park in London about anarchists in the Spanish Civil War, displaying a massive banner supporting the CNT.

In Catalonia, between May 3 and 8, in what came to be known as the May Days, clashes erupted in Barcelona between anarchists and other grassroots participants in the Spanish revolution, on one side, and on the other, police, communist party members serving Stalin,

and other members of the Republican government. This presaged the defeat of the Spanish revolution at the hands of Franco, betrayed by authoritarians within its ranks.

> "The thing for which the Communists were working was not to postpone the Spanish revolution till a more suitable time, but to make sure that it never happened. This became more and more obvious as time went on, as power was twisted more and more out of working-class hands, and as more and more revolutionaries of every shade were flung into jail. Every move was made in the name of military necessity, because this pretext was, so to speak, ready-made, but the effect was to drive the workers back from an advantageous position and into a position in which, when the war was over, they would find it impossible to resist the reintroduction of capitalism… There is very little doubt that arms were deliberately withheld lest too many of them should get into the hands of the Anarchists, who would afterwards use them for a revolutionary purpose." -George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia*

1945

As a teenager, the Spanish anarchist Antonio García Barón joined the Durruti Column to defeat fascism and advance the anarchist revolution during the Spanish Civil War. Thanks to the indifference of capitalist nations, Nazi support for Franco's forces, and the communists' betrayals of other anti-fascists, the revolution in Spain was defeated by 1939, but Barón himself never gave up. He made his way to the battle of Dunkirk, where he gave a hungry British soldier a much-needed lunch break by grabbing his gun and shooting down two Nazi warplanes, much to the soldier's surprise.

Not long after, Barón was captured and sent to the Nazi death camp at Mauthausen. Even surrounded by mass executions and starvation, Barón carried his anarchist ideals with him. During a visit by Himmler himself, Barón managed to confront the SS leader. Spain had taken away Barón's nationality when he entered the concentration camp; he never attempted to get it back. In Mauthausen, Barón was marked with a blue triangle and the letter "S"—the mark identifying prisoners who were deemed stateless.

The gas chamber executions at Mauthausen continued until just before Adolf Hitler committed suicide on May 1, 1945. On May 5, the Allied Forces liberated the Mauthausen concentration camp. They were welcomed with a banner that read, "The Spanish antifascists salute the liberating forces." With the defeat of fascism and the liberation of the concentration camps, Antonio García Barón set out to live his life outside the reach of the state, capitalism, and most importantly the church. He settled down in the Bolivian jungle where, despite jaguar attacks and multiple assassination attempts, he lived on to be the last survivor of the Durruti Column.

1950

Black workers in South Africa had participated in May Day demonstrations since 1928, when their march dwarfed the whites-only demonstration organized by the racist Labor Party. In 1950, the Communist Party of South Africa called for a May Day strike to protest against the Suppression of Communism Act. South African police retaliated with brutal violence, killing 18 people across Soweto. The young Nelson Mandela sought refuge in a nurses' dormitory overnight to escape from the gunfire.

1968

Following months of conflict between students and authorities at the Paris University at Nanterre, the administration shut down the university on May 2, 1968. Students at the Sorbonne University in Paris met on May 3 to protest in solidarity with students at Nanterre. On May 6, more than 20,000 students, teachers and supporters marched towards the Sorbonne to confront the police who were attempting to seal it off. Massive clashes ensue, precipitating a month of strikes and occupations that nearly toppled the French government.

1971

On May 1, over 50,000 people attended an anti-war concert in Washington, DC organized in coordination with the May Day Tribe, a radical left formation including Yippie, gay, and feminist contingents. The government rescinded the permit and evicted the park in which the concert was taking place. Nevertheless, at dawn on May 3, well over 15,000 anti-war protesters organized into affinity groups attempted to shut down the entire city of Washington DC by means of coordinated civil disobedience. An equal number of police, soldiers, and marines responded with tear gas and violent attacks, seizing and destroying property at random including two marked ambulances. Over 7000 people were arrested by 8 am, and the number approaches 13,000 by the end of the week—only 79 of whom were ultimately convicted. A federal court later awarded a total of $12 million to arrestees.

1983

In London, the anarchist periodical *Class War* published their first issue on May Day. Recognizing intuitively that workplace struggles had largely been outflanked by the restructuring of neoliberal capitalism, *Class War* focused on community struggles and urban unrest, gleefully provoking Thatcherites with irreverent humor that continues to influence some of today's best anarchist propagandists.

In participating in anti-fascist organizing, the Poll Tax Riots that toppled Thatcher's government, and the Carnival against Capitalism of June 18, 1999 that set the stage for the

demonstrations against the World Trade Organization summit in Seattle in 1999, Class War helped create the foundation for today's resurgent anarchist movements.

1986

In Ukraine, state celebrations on the one-hundred-year anniversary of May Day proceeded as planned, although many of the officials of the ruling Communist Party were absent without explanation. That was because the nuclear reactor at Chernobyl was melting down, pouring lethal radiation into the air. The party bureaucrats knew that this was occurring, but had yet to acknowledge it to the public, exposing countless workers to radiation poisoning.

This catastrophe illustrates the fatal effects of the cooptation of May Day and workers' movements in general by authoritarian parties. Whether socialist or democratic, the very existence of the state itself presupposes hierarchies that inevitably expose workers and others to disproportionate risk.

1987

In Berlin, a street party in the Kreuzberg area on May Day unexpectedly became a major conflict drawing in many sectors of the population, forcing police to abandon the district for hours. From that night of freedom sprang a tradition of mass confrontation, a yearly day of rioting in downtown Berlin that continues up to this day.

2006

In 2006, tens of thousands of immigrants and supporters went on strike to demonstrate against repressive migration policies.

2010

May Day 2010 saw small but combative demonstrations across the United States such as Asheville, North Carolina and Santa Cruz, California, both of which included considerable property destruction as demonstrators struck back against gentrification. In Asheville, police arrested eleven people at random and charged them with a variety of felonies including conspiracy. The case dragged on for years. In the end, a few defendants took misdemeanor plea deals, while the rest were let off without convictions.

2012

May Day 2012 saw powerful anarchist demonstrations around the world, notably in Montreal, Oakland, and Seattle.

In Montreal, at the high point of a powerful student strike, hundreds of participants in a fierce May Day demonstration clashed with police. The march started on the Champ de Mars, just in front of Montréal City Hall, and quickly moved towards the downtown core. It included one of the largest black blocs that had taken the streets of Montréal at that point—perhaps 300 strong.

In Oakland, after a night of vandalism throughout rapidly gentrifying neighborhoods in San Francisco, hundreds marched across the city, beginning and ending the day by clashing with riot police at Oscar Grant plaza, previously the site of Occupy Oakland.

In Seattle, a black bloc marched through town, unexpectedly attacking the Niketown famously damaged by demonstrators against the 1999 World Trade Organization summit. What had taken activists from all around the United States and the world to accomplish in 1999 was now carried out by locals despite the presence of large numbers of police.

In Berlin, meanwhile, years of efforts on the part of the authorities to get control of the unruly May Day demonstrations were starting to pay off. It turned out that it was more effective for the government to organize their own tightly-regulated May Day festivities than to simply attempt to crush the demonstrations by brute force. It's instructive to take a close look at their strategy.

2015

Several hundred demonstrators in Milan clashed with police in protests against capitalism, the state, and corruption around the corporate "Expo 2015."

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