

May 1, 2009

May Day

May Day is recognized worldwide, outside the U.S., as the international “Labor Day”. It’s the holiday to honor the working class and to promote the working class agenda. It’s also commonly known, again outside the U.S., that its origin was a United States national strike that was called by the American Federation of Labor (AFL) for May 1, 1886- MAY DAY.

In 1886, Organized Labor’s demand was simple and tremendous: Reduce the workday to 8 hours with no reduction in daily pay. “8 hours for work, 8 hours for rest, and 8 hours for what we will!” was a popular slogan. At the time, the workday was generally a minimum of 10 hours and workers were paid by the day, not by the hour. The vast organizing activity around this demand resulted in a great and momentous national strike of hundreds of thousands of U.S. workers from all crafts, trades and industries.

The employers and the capitalist class recognized the threat this posed. They prepared and mobilized to crush the strikers. On May Day the police and militias brutally attacked and clashed with strikers in a number of cities and towns nationwide. The most famous of these attacks occurred over a number of days in Chicago. The rallying strikers were fired upon and several were killed. The brave and purposeful strikers regrouped in a city plaza called “Haymarket Square”. Again the police attacked. A bomb was thrown resulting in more casualties, including the police. It was never determined who threw that bomb and for what motive. However, the bombing was used as a pretext to round up a number of Chicago labor leaders. Those labor leaders were tried and some were executed in what was widely perceived as an unjust “show trial”.

Despite the ruling class fight back, the national strike was largely successful in forcing employers to accept the 8 hour workday demand with no cut in daily pay. These events of May 1, 1886 and its aftermath were internationally reported and closely followed by workers. There were also supporting demonstrations and celebrations occurring worldwide. In the years since, workers in many nations

have continuously held May Day parades, rallies or other actions to call attention to whatever working class issue was deemed appropriate.

The U.S. Labor movement eventually split from the rest of the world to observe the “Labor Day” that we honor in September. That day should and will continue to be celebrated by U.S. workers. However, the events of May 1886 are omitted from the history textbooks and lessons taught in U.S. schools. It’s time to change that and reclaim our history.

Many area labor unions and organizations, including District 1199C, have signed on to the effort and have passed resolutions to promote worker awareness and participation in May Day observances. As a result, this past May Day (Friday, May 1, 2009) marked the 2nd annual celebration in Philadelphia. A rally was held at Elmwood Park, located at South 71st and Buist Streets. This is a neighborhood park that the residents have cleaned up and are rehabilitating to commemorate U.S. and local labor history. It will soon be complete with various monuments and historical markers. About 100 workers from various organizations rallied in the Park with live Rock and Hip Hop music and listening to short speeches from area labor leaders. The neighborhood’s Tilden Middle School was also provided 250 copies of “The People’s History of American Empire” by Howard Zinn. It’s an illustrated US history text from a working class perspective.

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