

WHAT DOES MAY DAY MEAN TODAY?

by Scott Tucker

May Day belongs to the workers of the world, but the meaning of this day changes over time, even as national borders have been redrawn over various regions, and even as power has shifted among various political regimes. If only one strong lesson is drawn from the world history of May Days, it must be that every open class struggle is marked by the global reach of capital across national borders; and May Day must likewise widen the horizon of solidarity beyond one workplace, one labor union, or one nation.

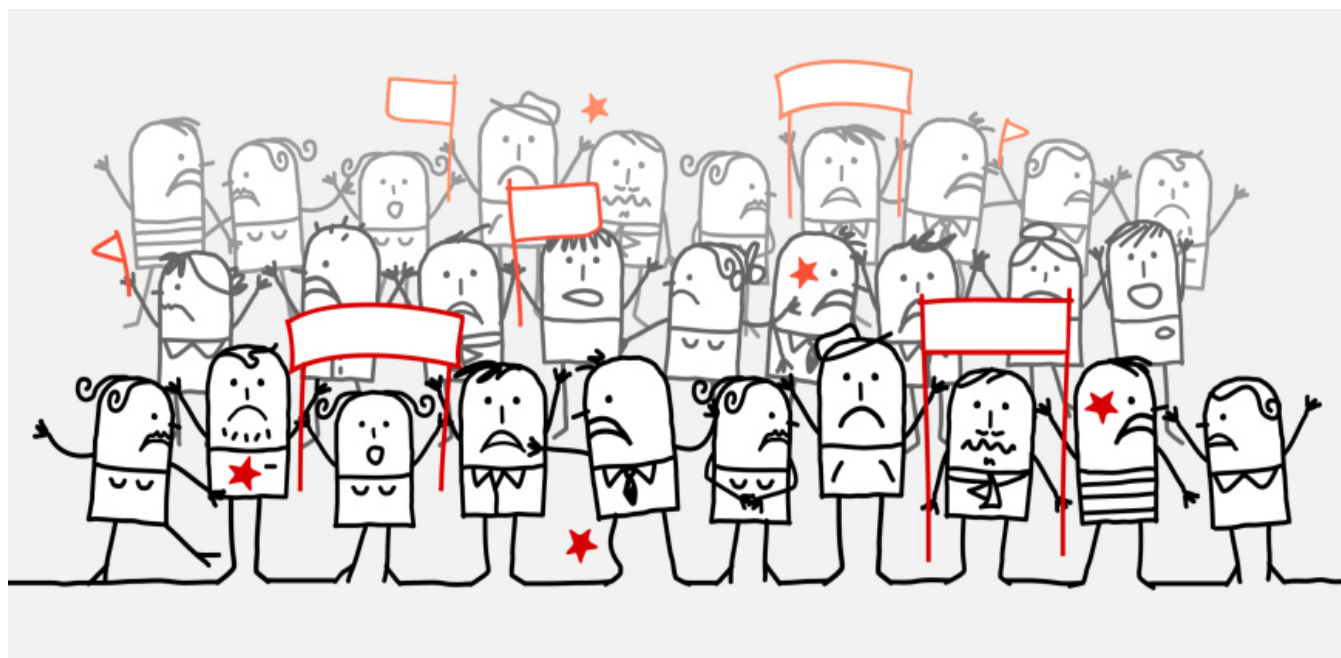
Yes, our own workplaces and neighborhoods may be very dear to us, but the economic storms of one country can gain hurricane force when they cross the wide ocean and strike another country. Socialists are internationalists by moral conviction, of course, but also by stark necessity. We can no more build “socialism in one country” than modern corporations can be turned back into the mercantile guilds of the fifteenth century.

When the many immigrant workers of the world gather for May Day in Los Angeles, of course the flags of many countries are displayed, and so are the flags and banners of class-conscious solidarity across all borders. Red flags and black flags testify to the rich history of the working class in the creation of May Day marches and demonstrations. Indeed, May Day cannot be claimed as the exclusive property of any single party, tendency, or sect.

The history of May Day really begins in the working class struggle for the ten-hour day, and then for the eight-hour day, both in Europe and in the United States. The limitation of work hours was indeed a major demand in the mass strikes among workers in mines, mills, and railroad yards of 1877, which were put down in this country by conniving politicians and brutal police. In 1884, a resolution was passed at a convention of the predecessor of the American Federation of Labor, stating, “that eight hours shall constitute legal day’s labor from and after May 1, 1886.”

On that date, over a half million workers went on strike or joined in marches of protest. In Chicago, the demonstrations begun on May 1 lasted several days, and for the most part endured provocations from hired thugs with good order. On May 3, however, police fired at workers who had rallied outside the factory of the McCormick Harvesting Machine Company, killing two workers. To protest the shootings, workers rallied the next day at Haymarket Square. When police moved to clear the crowd from the Square, an unknown person threw a bomb. In the resulting riot, both policemen and protesters were killed, with many injured. Seven anarchists were prosecuted and sentenced to death, and another was given a fifteen-year prison term.

The trials were so flawed and inflamed by political prejudice that Governor John Peter Altgeld, a leading figure



of the Progressive movement, would later pardon three of the convicted men. In 1894, when Eugene V. Debs and others organized the Pullman Rail Strike, Altgeld also refused to have federal troops break it up by force. (President Grover Cleveland proceeded to crush the strike in several states, and tried to distract angry workers by offering them an official Labor Day.) The bronze plaque on Altgeld's grave quotes his words in making both decisions; and these words remain a stark rebuke to the cowardice of present career politicians.

Theodore Roosevelt, who once called Thomas Paine "that filthy little atheist," denounced Altgeld as "one who would connive at wholesale murder" and "who would substitute for the government of Washington and Lincoln a red welter of lawlessness and dishonesty as fantastic and vicious as the Paris Commune." Since Altgeld was a Democrat (though on the left of that party), and since Roosevelt was then a Republican, his rhetoric was pitched with partisan vehemence. But we must recall that Roosevelt was himself a leader of the Progressive movement of that era, and indeed became a candidate of the short-lived Progressive Party. Roosevelt was a militarist, an imperialist, and (from 1901 to 1909) the 26th President of the United States.

If the Progressive movement could encompass both Altgeld and Roosevelt among its leaders, this only underscores the contradictions within that movement, not only in the realm of ideology, but also in the corporate economy, in civil liberties, and in foreign policy. Even the rhetorical appeal to Abraham Lincoln, a founder of the Republican Party, is used in the cause of red-baiting, though the actual class politics of Lincoln emerged and evolved in direct engagement with the institution of slavery. Lincoln often said that his great aim was not the abolition of slavery, but the preservation of the Union. Only in the course of the Civil War did Lincoln come round to the view that slavery had to be abolished, and only the Abolitionists (including John Brown and Frederick Douglass) had been resolute in that cause even before the war. The class analysis of the republic that Lincoln gave to Congress on December 3, 1861 is worth study:

"Labor is prior to and independent of capital. Capital is only the fruit of labor, and could never have existed if labor had not first existed. Labor is the superior of capital, and deserves the much higher consideration."

Those words are sufficiently radical that no recent President has dared to speak as directly in public, or even to quote Lincoln on these subjects. But Lincoln went on to state that capital and labor do not exhaust the actual social and productive relations between classes: "The error is in assuming that the whole labor of community exists within that relation." Lincoln considers a diverse group of people who are "neither slaves nor masters" in the southern states, and who are "neither hirers nor hired" in the northern states:

"Men, with their families — wives, sons, and daughters — work for themselves on their farms, in their houses, and in their shops, taking the whole product to themselves, and asking no favors of capital on the one hand nor of hired laborers or slaves on the other. It is not forgotten that a considerable number of persons mingle their own labor with capital; that is they labor with their own hands and also buy or hire others to labor for them; but this is only a mixed and not a distinct class. No principle stated is disturbed by the existence of this mixed class."

Plainly, Lincoln's view is not explicitly socialist, and far less strictly Marxist; but his words are genuinely more populist than we will hear from almost any career politician now in the White House or in Congress or in fifty state legislatures. This "mixed class" was Lincoln's special concern, since here he found the real class foundation of any viable republic. He still held out the ideal that a large "mixed class" of workers (largely within an economy of small farms, patriarchal households, and domestic production) could maintain their liberty against the power of capital. They might indeed "mingle their own labor with capital," though with considerable autonomy, perhaps through loans, credit, and contract, for example. This "mixed class" was not what we would now call "the middle class," under present class conditions, but was rather the general public unencumbered by the institution of slavery.

The accumulation of capital, however, became the ruling passion of a ruling class; and the corporation, which had once been subject to fairly strict public charters, gained much greater power over and against the public. Every war encourages shady deals, and in the wake of the Civil War the new victors often dictated terms favorable to their own class advancement. In a letter to Col. William F. Elkins (Ref: The Lincoln Encyclopedia, Archer H. Shaw, NY, NY: Macmillan, 1950), Lincoln wrote:

"I see in the near future a crisis approaching that unnerves me and causes me to tremble for the safety of my country... corporations have been enthroned and an era of corruption in high places will follow, and the money power of the country will endeavor to prolong its reign by working upon the prejudices of the people until all wealth is aggregated in a few hands and the Republic is destroyed."

In 1886, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Santa Clara County v. Southern Pacific Railroad* that a private corporation was a natural person under the U.S. Constitution, protected by the Bill of Rights and the 14th Amendment. As Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas wrote sixty years later, "There was no history, logic, or reason to support that view." No, but there were powerful corporations rigging elections, buying candidates, and lobbying to make sure their case was heard loud and clear in the courts of the land.



In the United States, the corruption in big banks and high finance resulted in great part from a deliberate bipartisan policy of deregulation. The career politicians of the two big capitalist parties were not "equally" responsible, however, when President Bill Clinton signed The Financial Services Modernization Act, also known as the Gramm-Leach-Bliley Act of 1999. Clinton was glad that "centrist" career politicians in the Democratic Party would get the main credit as modernizers, and thus sweep into the dustbin of history the last effective provisions of the Glass-Steagall Act, part of the legislative firewall that was designed in the 1930s to prevent a new cycle of financial corruption and, consequently, a new economic depression.

There were dissenters, of course. As Joseph Stiglitz, a Nobel Prize-winning economist, commented:

"Commercial banks are not supposed to be high-risk ventures; they are supposed to manage other people's money very conservatively. It is with this understanding that the government agrees to pick up the tab should they fail. Investment banks, on the other hand, have traditionally managed rich people's money -- people who can take bigger risks in order to get bigger -- returns. When repeal of Glass-Steagall brought investment and commercial banks together, the investment-bank culture came out on top. There was a demand for the kind of high returns that could be obtained only through high leverage and big risk-taking." [Source: <http://www.commondreams.org/view/2009/11/12-8>]:

The economic shock waves that had been building even before 2008 soon sent the first tsunami even to the shores of Europe. In turn, the ongoing euro crisis (largely the result of a currency union where no coherent political union exists) also threatens the stability of the economy of the United States.

The economic weather in these countries may be described as a serious recession if we live in Los Angeles, but is better described as a real depression if we live in Athens. Berlin, however, is relatively prosperous, while Detroit is still in pain. The city of Philadelphia, where well over forty percent of the citizens are African American, still proves that racial fractures run through the foundation of our economy, and that economic class in this country is by no means "color-blind." There are still, to be sure, micro-climates of inherited wealth. Much more significantly, corporate executives have soared to a new stratosphere of power and accumulation of capital.

May Days in Los Angeles sometimes drew hundreds, and at most a few thousand, participants in Los Angeles between 2001 and 2005, through the dedicated work of some labor unions and civic groups for immigrant workers. The legislative assault on the rights of immigrant workers, and especially a bill sponsored by Rep. James Sensenbrenner (R-Wisconsin), was well publicized through Spanish language newspapers and radio stations. In 2006, May Day became an event the corporate broadcasters and stations could not ignore, because millions of people marched in over 100 cities. Los Angeles certainly had the largest number of people in the streets and parks, by some estimates roughly one million. Hundreds of thousands of people participated in Chicago and New York, and smaller marches and protests took place

in other cities and towns.

The meteoric rise and fall of the Occupy Wall Street movement, which began with one small encampment in Zuccotti Park in Manhattan, points the way to future coalitions across class and region; but it also underscored the power of the state. In roughly ten days, a coordinated police crackdown erased most of the major Occupy encampments in most of the major cities across the country. In Los Angeles, the encampment at City Hall held out a while longer, and then the police closed it down as well. Have the conditions that drove so many to heartbreak, and then to anger, and then to action changed? Have the corporate politicians responded with sanity and practical programs? There are reformers such as Elizabeth Warren, recently elected from Massachusetts to the U.S. Senate, and there are upticks in some housing markets. But the structural faults of the corporate system remain, and the class divisions are still growing. Barely 12 percent of workers are members of labor unions, and every big election is rigged to place corporate candidates on the ballot.

As the Keynesian economist Paul Krugman wrote in his New York Times op ed column of April 22, 2013, "The financial crisis struck, leading to a terrifying economic plunge followed by a weak recovery. Five years after the crisis, unemployment remains elevated, with almost 12 million Americans out of work. But what's really striking is the huge number of long-term unemployed, with 4.6 million more than six months and more, and more than three million who have been jobless for a year or more. Oh, and these numbers don't count those who have given up looking for work because there are no jobs to be found." Krugman added, "So we are indeed creating a permanent class of jobless Americans. And let's be clear: this is a policy decision."

President Obama is now proposing a bipartisan Grand Bargain to undermine Social Security, and his patchwork health care reform is already allowing many sick people to fall once again through fraying safety nets. MoveOn and other groups that labored to raise funds and votes to get Obama elected to a second term are now pushing petitions online expressing their "disappointment" in the party and candidate of their choice. Such "progressives" give progress a bad name, and give every sign they will vote by rote in 2016.

The Socialist Party of the United States is a party of (small d) democratic socialism, and we have a solid program. On May Day, we will join the Southern California Immigration Coalition in Los Angeles. We welcome a good faith conversation with members of other parties, and indeed with people beyond our national borders. We stand for peace and economic democracy, for civil liberties and fair elections, for ecological sanity and international solidarity. We oppose war and weapons of mass destruction, and we call for the abolition of all nuclear weapons. We still think workers, who are the great majority of humanity, have the power to change the world.

"I am not a Labor Leader," said Eugene V. Debs. "I do not want you to follow me or anyone else; if you are looking for a Moses to lead you out of this capitalist wilderness, you will stay right where you are. I could not lead you into the Promised Land if I could, because if I could someone else would lead you out. You must use your heads as well as your hands, and get yourselves out of your present condition; as it is now it is the capitalists who use your heads and your hands."

Not one cent and not one vote for the parties of war and empire!

Make every May Day a festival of solidarity!

SCOTT TUCKER is a journalist, author and member of the Los Angeles Local.