MAY DAY 2012: REMEMBERING WHY

Robert J.S. Ross, [rjsross@clarku.edu](mailto:rjsross@clarku.edu)

The story of May Day begins with the struggle to make the eight-hour workday the legal and economic norm for wageworkers. In the older industrial countries, this struggle was largely successful, though, as we have seen the last thirty years of apparel work has brought old abuses back. Here in the United States we work more annual hours than almost all of our Western European counterparts, according to the OECD. It makes sense to think about this history carefully.

Had the task of regulating the workday been left only to market effects of economic growth, and not social, political and trade union action, how many more of us would be toiling the same ten and twelve-hour days that our grandparents did, or that sewing machine operators in New York and Los Angeles and Guangdong Province do now?

Since late in the eighteenth century American workers have sought to protect their lives and families and their humanity by limiting the hours of the workday.  In 1844 John Cluers led a labor federation calling for July 4 of that year to be declared a Second Independence Day in support of the ten-hour day. ( see Foner 1986, below: 17)

In the Fall of 1885 the predecessor to the American Federation of Labor (AFL) decided upon May 1886 as the start of a series of strikes for the eight hour day.[[1]](#footnote-1)  They called for demonstrations declaring that after May 1 the working day would be de facto eight hours.  Hundreds of thousands did demonstrate and strike that day, and tens of thousands won shorter hours.  (Foner 1986: 27) The most memorable and tragic events of the 1886 struggle occurred in the days directly after what Samuel Gompers grandly called the Second Independence Day.

In Chicago, the Lumber Shovers union of 10,000 was on strike for the eight-hour day.  They held a rally on May 3rd.  The earlier May 1st rally in Chicago had been gigantic, and the city was tense.  The May 3 rally took place very near the McCormick Harvester works, then gripped in a bitter lock-out and strike.  As the workday ended at Harvester, strikebreakers came through the gates and some of the six thousand rallying workers protested against them.  Police shot at the rallying lumber shovers and killed four.

On the next day, May 4, the leaders of the Chicago Eight-hour movement, anarcho-syndicalists of exceptional leadership ability, called for a protest of the shootings and a demonstration of resolve.  It was rainy and there were numerous neighborhood rallies that day. The crowd was small.  It dwindled from three thousand when the charismatic Albert Spies spoke, followed by his comrade Albert Parsons.  By the time Samuel Fielden began his address the crowd had become only 300.

Then, 180 armed police, who had been waiting in a side street, marched into Haymarket Square, surrounded the small throng, and ordered the crowd to disperse. Fielden defended his right to speak.  The police approached the platform and a bomb was thrown at them.  One officer died there and six later.  Later research showed that the police who later died were shot by friendly fire as a result of indiscriminate firing into the crowd. (Foner 1986: 31, citing Paul Avrich)

Without any evidence at all, the leaders of the eight-hour movement were tried and convicted of the murder of one of the police. Four were eventually hanged in November 1887; years later a courageous governor of Illinois, John Peter Altgeld pardoned three who were still in jail.  One of the eight died in prison.

After the convictions of the Haymarket leaders a worldwide movement in their defense spread through the labor and socialist camps.  Thus, the American struggle for an eight-hour day was internationalized by the trial of the Haymarket martyrs.

At home, the defense efforts were not successful – although three of the eight eventually had their death sentences commuted.  The Haymarket bombing sparked the first Red Scare.  Police around the country hounded labor leaders and socialist and anarchist groups.

However, by 1888, Gompers and the AFL were ready to launch once again a militant movement for the eight-hour day.  The AFL called for a series of demonstrations, including Washington’s Birthday and July 4th 1889, and May 1, 1890.

In the summer of 1889, the (Second) Socialist International was being refounded in Paris.  A representative from the AFL read a letter from Gompers to the Socialist Congress asking for support for worldwide demonstrations in favor of the eight-hour day.  The French representative LaVigne inserted into a prior resolution on the eight hour day support for the American demonstrations on May 1st 1890.

And so, around the world on May 1, 1890, workers called for the eight-hour workday – and many struck and achieved it or shorter hours.  In Vienna, the entire working class called the day off.  In the United States, the Carpenters, leaders in the struggle, won shorter hours for 75,000 workers.  By the next year, 1891, it appeared that the May 1st demonstrations for a shorter workday had become an international and regular practice, becoming also a call for universal peace and a celebration of working class power.

Eventually, the conservative swing of the AFL would cause that labor federation to give up ownership of May Day and instead to preserve Labor Day as a more conventional American celebration.

Recently though, our knowledge of working conditions in a world that has become de facto one large labor pool, has or should have made us more sharply aware of the role of social regulation, and the ways in which our current practices were earned.  The laureates of the market would have us believe that those demonstrations and strikes – that blood and honor – were simply small absurd sideshows to history.

When trade and labor standards are discussed the history of norms of decency for labor is often obscured.  Mayday –the international workers’ day – began in the United States as a struggle for the eight-hour day. Recall the lines from James Oppenheim’s famous (1911) poem,

“Small art and love and beauty their drudging spirits knew.

Yes, it is bread we fight for -- but we fight for roses, too!

…No more the drudge and idler -- ten that toil where one reposes,

But a sharing of life's glories: Bread and roses! Bread and roses!”

Time to smell the roses --that is one meaning of Mayday.

Here is the heartfelt expression from the Eight Hour Song of the 1880’s:

“We want to feel the sunshine,

we want to smell the flowers

We’re sure that God has willed it,

        And we mean to have eight hours”

1. The following account is taken from Foner, Phillip S. 1986. May Day: A short history of the International Workers’ Holiday 1886-1986. International Publishers. New York,: 17-70. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)