

# MAY DAY AND ANARCHISM

May Day goes back at least as far as ancient Rome, celebrated by various European cultures as the start of summer and a festival of fertility and rebirth. Modern May Day is more associated with International Workers Day, originating with the American Federation of Labour (AFL), who launched a campaign for the 8 hour day on the 1st of May 1886. Many of us today take the 8 hour day for granted, but in the 19th century many workers were working 12, 14 or even 16 hour days. It was only through concerted struggle that the 8 hour day was won as the "standard" work day across much of North America and Europe.

This campaign was built on strikes and other militant actions that put real pressure on capitalism to give in. Chicago was one of the more radical hotbeds of action, and 400,000 people came out on a general strike that shut down much of the city. The police reacted to this with violence, rounding up militants, raiding houses and meeting places, and beating people. On the 3rd of May this escalated to gunfire, with the police killing at least two striking workers and leaving an unknown number injured.

After this act of brutality an emergency public meeting was called for the next day in Haymarket Square. The police tried to attack the meeting, a bomb was thrown into police lines, and police started firing randomly into the crowd. This resulted in 7 police deaths, but it is unclear how many police were killed by the bomb and how many were killed by their own gunfire, and at least 7 workers were killed by police with many more wounded.

After this massacre the authorities rounded up 8 activists and put them on trial for murder. 5 of them had not even been at Haymarket, but all were given the death penalty by a rigged jury of business leaders. In the end, 4 were hung, 1 committed suicide, and 3 had their sentences changed to life imprisonment. Eventually, all 8 were acquitted and the authorities admitted they had been wrongly convicted. This pardon was little comfort to the workers already killed, their families, or their friends. In 1889, May 1st was adopted as an international day of struggle for the 8 hour day by the Second International of social democratic parties in commemoration of the workers killed, injured, and imprisoned in the 1886 Chicago campaign.

However, the 8 activists arrested after the Haymarket massacre were not social democrats, they were anarchists, and the Chicago campaign had a very strong anarchist presence, with Chicago being the first city to support a daily anarchist newspaper. Unlike the social democrats, the anarchists saw the state as as much of an oppressor and exploiter of the working class as capitalism, wanted a world where workers ran the economy from the bottom up, and advocated for actions like strikes to bring about lasting change instead of relying on political parties.

The radicalism and militancy that kicked off International Workers Day is one of the things that the modern British left has lost. The idea of May Day as a day of strikes, actions, and demonstrations that put fear into the hearts of the ruling class has been replaced with a sedate A to B march, while living conditions worsen, wages drop, and hours increase. We only get what we are willing to fight for, and without a willingness to struggle in the present day we can lose the gains made by previous workers. For many modern workers, the 8 hour day has already been lost.

The mainstream left often has no ideas beyond getting a social democratic or green party into power, either through election or revolution. This strategy is based on the idea that workers are incapable of running our own lives or our own workplaces, and that the best we can do is support a technocratic "socialist" ruling class to rule over us more kindly than capitalism. But "socialist" rulers have proved just as corrupt and malicious as capitalists; they control and abuse workers for their own ends.

But anarchism, often written out of the history of labour struggle, offers an alternative to choosing between rulers; a vision of popular power where workers collectively manage our workplaces and neighbours come together to collectively manage our communities, and those workplaces and communities cooperate together from the bottom up without rulership. This power is not built with political parties and elections, but through organising strikes against bosses and landlords, mutual aid, and direct action to fight abuse by capitalists and governments until workers are powerful and organised enough to throw both out of power.

Learn more about anarchism:

The Anarchist Library - [theanarchistlibrary.org](http://theanarchistlibrary.org)

An Anarchist FAQ - [anarchistfaq.org](http://anarchistfaq.org)

Radical Actions and Events - [radar.squat.net](http://radar.squat.net)