

MAY DAY

And Related History

Since 1889, May 1 has been the official workers' holiday throughout the industrial world. It was so designated by the Second International, meeting on the 100th Anniversary of the French Revolution, which brought together union and socialist organizations. And why was May 1 chosen? Because after years of struggle for the 8 hour day, the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions on May 1, 1886, decided to call a general strike to demonstrate their commitment to this demand.

Through most of the 19th century, American workers toiled from sunup to sundown, 11 to 14 hours a day, for less than \$2 a day. In 1866, in Baltimore, the National Labor Union was formed, calling on all workers "to rise in the majesty of their strength" and challenge employers to acknowledge their rights. It called for legislation creating an 8 hour day. Six states passed such laws "where there is no special contract or agreement to the contrary." The Knights of Labor in 1869 called for the abolition of child and convict labor. Eight Hour Leagues were formed. People were singing: "Whether you work by the piece or work by the day/ Decreasing the hours increases the pay." (In 1872, the National Labor Union became the National Labor Reform Party.) In the 1880s, unions gave up the attempt to secure an 8 hour day by political action, and returned to economic pressure.

May 1, 1886. 400,000 workers participated, 40,000 in Chicago, center of the 8 hour day movement. May 3. Police killed striker at McCormick Reaper Works. 1,400 men had been locked out for months. Anarchists called a meeting for Haymarket Sq. for next evening, May 4, to protest killing. Meeting peaceful. Police Captain led a large force to disperse the crowd. A bomb was thrown killing 7 policemen.

The fight for shorter hours:

- 1791—Philadelphia carpenters struck for a 10 hour day.
- 1840—Pres. Van Buren Executive Order granting Navy Yard workers a 10 hour day.
- 1842—Mass. Established a 10 hour day for children under 12.
- 1847—New Hampshire adopted a 10 hour day
- 1853—New York public workers granted a 10 hour day
- 1859—Philadelphia Machinists called for 8 hour day
- 1867—Conn, Ill, Wisconsin, NY, Miss, Calif granted 8 hour day
- 1868—Federal law: 8 hour day for US laborers.
- 1870—NY 8 hour day for State and Municipal employees
- 1888—General Post Office 8 hour day
- 1892—US and DC public workers, 8 hour day
- 1936—Walsh-Healey 40 hour week for govt contracts over \$10,000
- 1938—FLSA 40 hour week for workers in interstate commerce

History of the American Labor Movement

Late 1700s—artisans organized benevolent societies to help re sickness or death

1790s—skilled workers in Phila, NY and Boston organized to resist wage reductions

Early 1800s—unions prosecuted as conspiracies in restraint of trade
1830s—unions turn to political action, press for 10 hour day, restrict child labor, abolish convict labor, abolish home and factory sweatshops, public education
1840s—utopianism, coops. Unions seek control over apprenticeship, minimum wages, closed shop
1850s—National unions formed: printers, stonecutters, hatters, machinists, RR workers
1860s—demand for higher wages, shorter hours. Unions grew
1870s—membership dropped: 1872-300,000; 1878-50,000. Strikes lost, lockouts
1880s- back to 300,000. Kof L formed in 1869. Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions in 1881. AFL in 1886.

1848—Communist Manifesto
1864—1st International founded in London to further world socialism
1876—Dissolved in Philadelphia
1889—2nd International founded in Paris to celebrate the 100th anniv. of the French Rev. Established May Day as the official International Workers Holiday.
1917—March 8. Russian Revolution begins in Petrograd
March 12, New provincial govt. headed by Prince Lvov
March 15. Czar Nicholas abdicates
July 20. Kerensky replaces Lvov
November 6,7. Bolsheviks seize power
1918—July 16. Czar Nicholas and family shot

I suspect I wrote this around May 1, 2010, with the help of Google. This is not the kind of memoir I usually write. If I tried to remember May Days when I was a kid, what would come to mind are the Communist dominated May Day parades to Union Square. Marching would be the left wing unions—the furriers, UE, NMU and segments of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers and even the ILGWU. Also the IWO and its Jewish contingent, the JPFO, and members of the CP and fellow travelers. They turned out a crowd in the '30s and through the Popular Front period of the war, but during the post war period, the crowds thinned, booed the marchers, and people laughed at newsreels showing the marchers ducking into the subway at 14 St. to ride uptown to rejoin the march. The “official” labor movement marched on Labor Day.

I resented the fact that the Communists had “captured” May Day, because I had learned in high school that it commemorated the struggle for the 8 hour day, and that its origin was in Chicago, not in Moscow. But everybody associated May Day with the big parades in Red Square with Stalin and the Comintern standing on Lenin’s tomb, reviewing the Red Army as it marched by.

I also found it amusing that in England May Day is about little girls dancing around the May Pole.