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MAY DAY 1986

by

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The May Day posters proclaimed that 1986 was the 100th anniversary of May Day. As a worker's holiday, May Day has its origin in Chicago. It is odd that this Socialist festival has its roots in the United States, but this should serve to remind us that the United States was not always a citadel of conservatism.

It was 100 years ago that the newly formed American Federation of Labor announced that beginning on May 1, 1886 eight hours would constitute the official working day. Eight hours a day was a virtual utopian dream to a labor force that worked as much as twelve hours a day. Even as late as the Roosevelt era the normal working day in the steel mills of the United States Steel Company was twelve hours.

The eight hour manifesto by the American Federation of Labor sparked a mass organization of labor. The modern American labor movement owes much to that drive. The burst of union organizing was resisted by both employers and the organs of the state. Government was not neutral, almost always it was on the side of the employers.

The eight hour day movement led to a strike at the McCormack Re^apper Works, a pioneer^d manufacturer of farm machinery.

The McCormack Re^gpper Works became part of the International Harvester Company, which is still based in Chicago and which is now in dire financial straits because of the pressure in the agricultural machinery industry due to the depression in American agriculture.

The McCormack strike was a bitter struggle, marked by violence. It was accompanied by mass picketing, public demonstrations and rallies, and the use of the police against the strikers. One of the public meetings was in Haymarket Square.

At this meeting a bomb was thrown into an assembled troop of police, killing several. The bomb was followed by general rioting.

The workers at the Mc Cormack Works and their supporters were largely immigrants from Germany. German immigrants from 1828 until the first World War made up a large part of the progressive and Socialist movement in America; as late as the 1930's, when the American Socialist Movement was rapidly disintegrating, the heavily German industrial cities of Wisconsin-Racine, Kenosha, and Milwaukee, had Socialist mayors and city administrations.

After the riot, some German anarchists, who were putting out a German language newspaper that supported the strikers were arrested for the bombing. The evidence was fragmentary and largely based upon the general advocacy of violence in their paper, not on the specific act. The legal procedure dragged on for several years. Each year while it dragged on, the emerging European Socialist movements organized demonstrations of solidarity with the Haymarket Martyrs.

Some of the anarchists were executed, others received long term jail sentences. Those who were still alive were pardoned in the 1890's by Peter Altgeld, himself a German immigrant who was an outstanding progressive governor of Illinois.

May Day thus has its roots in two American events: the eight hour day movement and the Haymarket Riot, and the martyrs of the labor movement that resulted.

One hundred years is a long time in the history of capitalism and the modern labor movement. The left of today, as it seeks new directions because it now accepts that the progressive use of market arrangements is possible, can learn a great deal from the eight hour day movement. This movement promoted the dignity of labor within the capitalist economy; it was not a frontal attack on capitalism. Its weapon was the contrast between the conditions of labor, living in squalor and incapable of anything but brutish responses to the needs of family, with accepted conventions about family life.

Although the 1886 organizing effort failed, the eight hour day was ultimately successful. It took fifty years before the definition of the standard working day as eight hours was accepted in the United States, and then it was as much the product of New Deal legislation as the result of union organizing.

The past one hundred years has seen a great change in the nature of work. Fifty years ago George Orwell in the ROAD TO WIGGAM PIER described the brutal life of a British coal miner. In the advanced European capitalist countries and the United States the dehumanizing and brutal conditions Orwell described have been largely, though not completely, eliminated. Although it still exists, crude and raw exploitation of labor has been contained. Furthermore manufacturing, mining, and transport, the core of ~~the~~ traditional blue collar employment, have decreased both in total and as a percentage of the employed. Today work is largely white collar and in service

industries. The shop floor labor conditions and the cruel conditions of work that the eight hour day movement of a century ago fought are not compatible with the tasks that workers now do.

The left, and the trade union movement, need to rethink its commitments and its programs in the light of the changing nature of work. What was sufficient and necessary in the early stages of capitalism, what is appropriate for Korea and Taiwan now, and what the United States and Italy now need are quite different. Programs as bold and as radical as eight hours were in 1886 are needed. We need to reevaluate the institutions of 1986 that are a legacy from the past.

The essential radical view is that work is a good thing, and that chronic mass unemployment is a flaw of the economic order, not a flaw of the unemployed. Work is a public good, for only if work is available does a human achieve the dignity and self respect that makes a person a good citizen. The welfare state protections are important and must be sustained, but their provisions need to be changed so that the benefits provided are not a barrier to work. Income supplements and protection against contingencies that the welfare state provides should never be conditional upon being out of the labor force.

Income from work is not the only income workers receive. The ambience of the public environment is an income we receive. The well ordering of society, what in the United States is often called safety on the streets, is part of income. Of Franklin D. Roosevelt's four freedoms, freedom from fear has much deteriorated in the United States in the past decades. The lack of sufficient jobs is destructive of human and social integrity (the Black ghettos of America demonstrate this), and

leads to the lawlessness that creates fear.

One legacy from the past is the eight hour day, and the commitment to and the legal status of the eight hour day need to be reexamined. To an American, a peculiar feature of the Italian scene is the proliferation of workers with multiple jobs. The piecing together of a person's or a family's income by holding down a number of jobs is often viewed as a retrograde feature of the Italian economy. This is true if the second or third job lacks the protection and perhaps the access to income in the form of social and medical benefits of a primary job. However, this is a fault of laws and institutions which are not flexible enough to allow for a combination of part time jobs as the standard practice.

Full employment would be much easier to achieve if the legal structure allowed for four as well as eight hour jobs. In a world where industrial employment is decreasing and government and service sector employment are increasing, a four hour day movement is needed. It would take the position that a proliferation of what in conventional terminology is called part time work is necessary for a modern economy to achieve a close approximation to full employment. A guiding slogan of the movement might well be four hours pay (and supplements) for a four hour day.

Walter Reuther, the great leader of the Automobile Workers in the United States, once proposed that the white collar jobs associated with the assembly lines of the automobile industry be reserved for the blue collar workers who need to ease up on the pace at which they work. The idea was simple; there are some things the younger worker can do better than the older worker.

If the commitment to the assembly line is for an eight hour period, the ability and willingness to work at the pace required tapers off with age. One would think that a management committed to efficiency would have jumped at the chance to provide for such job succession, but Reuther's idea was unacceptable to management.

If full employment is the policy objective because of both the real output gained and the dignity it provides, then it is necessary to go beyond the eight hour day and the idea of one person one job, both at any time and over a lifetime of work.

A world in which many if not most jobs are into four hour segments provides flexibility, independence, and the ability to change and adjust.

All of the rich capitalist countries have elaborate structures of higher education. A four hour day allows for adults to retrain, to acquire skills as they see fit. It would breed ambition and commitment.

A four hour day would enable us to revamp some of the social programs that reflected a fear that full employment could not be achieved. The four hour day will enable the embattled old age pension systems to adjust to the changing demographic characteristics of our economies by allowing partial retirements.

Of course the four hour day is no panacea. It is a way of making the achievement of full employment easier, and a way of getting those part time jobs that make for amiable living done. The change in the nature of employment means that the lockstep routine of the factory of the 1920's is not appropriate for our times. The need is for institutions and laws to adjust to today's realities.

May Day was born out of a bold move by the American trade union movement. It was born out of a movement that was not aiming to eliminate capitalism, but to modify and change capitalism.

The 1886 move was important because it struck a responsive chord and became an ever constant goal of the union movement until it was finally achieved in the 1930's. We now need to adjust some of the inherited social features to the reality of how people earn their living in 1986. One characteristic of the adjustment that is required is the need for greater flexibility and autonomy for workers. A system that conforms to the realities of today would promote the combination of a number of four hour jobs into a livelihood.