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HISTORY
OF
MAY DAY

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INTERNATIONAL PUBLISHERS
NEW YORK

NOTE

History of May Day was first published in 1929 and was re-issued in many editions, reaching a circulation of over a quarter million copies. It is now published in a revised edition.

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HISTORY OF MAY DAY

THE ORIGIN OF MAY DAY is indissolubly bound up with the struggle for the shorter workday—a demand of major political significance for the working class. This struggle is manifest almost from the beginning of the factory system in the United States.

Although the demand for higher wages appears to be the most prevalent cause for the early strikes in this country, the question of shorter hours and the right to organize were always kept in the foreground when workers formulated their demands. As exploitation was becoming intensified and workers were feeling more and more the strain of inhumanly long working hours, the demand for an appreciable reduction of hours became more pronounced.

Already at the opening of the 19th century, workers in the United States made known their grievances against working from "sunrise to sunset," the then prevailing workday. Fourteen, sixteen and even eighteen hours a day were not uncommon. During the conspiracy trial against the leaders of striking Philadelphia cordwainers in 1806, it was brought out that workers were employed as long as nineteen and twenty hours a day.

The twenties and thirties are replete with strikes for reduction of hours of work and definite demands for a 10-hour day were put forward in many industrial centers. The organization of what is considered as the first trade union in the world, the Mechanics' Union of Philadelphia, preceding by two years the one formed by workers in England, can be definitely ascribed to a strike of building trade workers in Philadelphia in 1827 for the 10-hour day. During the bakers' strike in New York in 1834 the *Workingmen's Advocate* reported that "journeymen employed in the loaf bread business have for years been suffering worse than Egyp-

tian bondage. They have had to labor on an average of eighteen to twenty hours out of the twenty-four."

The demand in those localities for a 10-hour day soon grew into a movement, which, although impeded by the crisis of 1837, led the federal government under President Van Buren to decree the 10-hour day for all those employed on government work. The struggle for the universality of the 10-hour day, however, continued during the next decades. No sooner had this demand been secured in a number of industries than the workers began to raise the slogan for an 8-hour day. The feverish activity in organizing labor unions during the fifties gave this new demand an impetus which, however, was checked by the crisis of 1857. The demand was, however, won in a few well-organized trades before the crisis. That the movement for a shorter workday was not only peculiar to the United States, but was prevalent wherever workers were exploited under the rising capitalist system, can be seen from the fact that even in far away Australia the building trade workers raised the slogan "8 hours work, 8 hours recreation and 8 hours rest" and were successful in securing this demand in 1856.

EIGHT-HOUR MOVEMENT STARTED IN AMERICA

The struggles which directly gave birth to May Day, were initiated in the United States in 1884 in the movement for the 8-hour day. However, a generation before, a national labor organization, the National Labor Union, which at first gave great promise of developing into a militant organizing center of the American working class, took up the question of a shorter workday and proposed to organize a broad movement in its behalf. The first years of the Civil War, 1861-1862, saw the disappearance of the few national trade unions which had been formed just before the war began, especially the Molders' Union and the Machinists' and Blacksmiths' Union. The years immediately following, however, witnessed the unification on a national scale of a number of local labor organizations, and the urge for a national

federation of all these unions became apparent. On August 20, 1866, there gathered in Baltimore delegates from three scores of trade unions who formed the National Labor Union. The movement for the national organization was led by William H. Sylvis, the leader of the reconstructed Molders' Union, who, although a young man, was the outstanding figure in the labor movement of those years. Sylvis was in correspondence with the leaders of the First International in London and helped to influence the National Labor Union to establish relations with the General Council of the International.

It was at the founding convention of the National Labor Union in 1866 that the following resolution was passed:

"The first and great necessity of the present, to free labor of this country from capitalist slavery, is the passing of a law by which 8 hours shall be the normal working day in all states in the American union. We are resolved to put forth all our strength until this glorious result is attained."

The same convention voted for independent political action in connection with the securing of the legal enactment of the 8-hour day and the "election of men pledged to sustain and represent the interests of the industrial classes."

Eight-hour leagues were formed as a result of the agitation of the National Labor Union; and through the political activity which the organization developed, several state governments adopted the 8-hour day on public work and the U. S. Congress enacted a similar law in 1868. The inspired leader of the 8-hour movement was the Boston machinist, Ira Steward.

The program and policies of the early labor movement, although primitive and not always sound, were based, nevertheless, on healthy proletarian instinct and could have served as starting points for the development of a militant labor movement in this country were it not for the role played by reformist misleaders and capitalist politicians who later infested the labor organizations and directed them in wrong channels. Thus, four generations back, the national organization of American labor, the N. L. U., expressed itself against "capitalist slavery" and for independent political action.

Sylvis continued to keep in touch with the International in London. Due to his influence as president of the organization, the National Labor Union voted at its convention in 1867 to cooperate with the international working class movement and in 1869 it voted to accept the invitation of the General Council and send a delegate to the Basle Congress of the International. Unfortunately, Sylvis died just before the N. L. U. convention, and A. C. Cameron, the editor of the *Workingmen's Advocate*, published in Chicago, was sent as delegate in his stead. In a special resolution the General Council mourned the death of this promising young American labor leader. "The eyes of all were turned upon Sylvis, who, as a general of the proletarian army, had an experience of ten years, outside of his great abilities—and Sylvis is dead." The passing of Sylvis was one of the contributing causes of the decay which soon set in and led to the disappearance of the National Labor Union.

MARX ON THE EIGHT-HOUR MOVEMENT

The decision for the 8-hour day was made by the National Labor Union in August, 1866. In September of the same year the Geneva Congress of the First International went on record for the same demand in the following words:

"The legal limitation of the working day is a preliminary condition without which all further attempts at improvements and emancipation of the working class must prove abortive. . . . The Congress proposes 8 hours as the legal limit of the working day."

In the chapter on "The Working Day" in the first volume of *Capital*, published in 1867, Marx calls attention to the inauguration of the 8-hour movement by the National Labor Union. In the passage, famous especially because it contains Marx's telling reference to the solidarity of class interests between the Negro and white workers, he wrote:

"In the United States of America, any sort of independent labor movement was paralyzed so long as slavery disfigured a part of the republic. Labor with a white skin cannot emancipate itself where labor with a black skin is branded. But out of the death of

slavery a new vigorous life sprang. The first fruit of the Civil War was an agitation for the 8-hour day—a movement which ran with express speed from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from New England to California."

Marx calls attention to how almost simultaneously, in fact within two weeks of each other, a workers' convention meeting in Baltimore voted for the 8-hour day, and an international congress meeting in Geneva, Switzerland, adopted a similar decision. "Thus on both sides of the Atlantic did the working class movement, spontaneous outgrowth of the conditions of production," endorse the same movement of the limitation of hours of labor and concretize it in the demand for the 8-hour day.

That the decision of the Geneva Congress was coordinated with the American decision can be seen from the following portion of the resolution: "As this limitation represents the general demand of the workers of the North-American United States, the Congress transforms this demand into the general platform of the workers of the whole world."

A similar influence of the American labor movement upon an international congress and in behalf of the same cause was exerted more profoundly 23 years later.

MAY DAY BORN IN THE UNITED STATES

The First International ceased to exist as an international organization in 1872, when its headquarters were removed from London to New York, although it was not officially disbanded till 1876. It was at the first congress of the reconstituted International, later known as the Second International, held at Paris in 1889, that May First was set aside as a day upon which the workers of the world, organized in their political parties and trade unions, were to fight for the important political demand: the 8-hour day. The Paris decision was influenced by a decision made at Chicago five years earlier by delegates of a young American labor organization—the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions of the United States and Canada, later known under the abbreviated name, American Federation of Labor. At

the Fourth Convention of this organization, October 7, 1884, the following resolution was passed:

"Resolved by the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions of the United States and Canada, that eight hours shall constitute a legal day's labor from May First, 1886, and that we recommend to labor organizations throughout their jurisdiction that they so direct their laws as to conform to this resolution by the time named."

Although nothing was said in the resolution about the methods by which the Federation expected to establish the 8-hour day, it is self-evident that an organization which at that time commanded an adherence of not more than 50,000 members could not declare "that eight hours shall constitute a legal day's work" without putting up a fight for it in the shops, mills, and mines where its members were employed, and without attempting to draw into the struggle for the 8-hour day still larger numbers of workers. The provision in the resolution that the unions affiliated to the Federation "so direct their laws as to conform to this resolution" referred to the matter of paying strike benefits to their members who were expected to strike on May First, 1886, for the 8-hour day, and would probably have to stay out long enough to need assistance from the union. As this strike action was to be national in scope and involve all the affiliated organizations, the unions, according to their by-laws, had to secure the endorsement of the strike by their members, particularly since that would involve the expenditure of funds, etc. It must be remembered that the Federation, just as the A. F. of L. today, was organized on a voluntary, federation basis, and decisions of a national convention could be binding upon affiliated unions only if those unions endorsed these decisions.

PREPARATIONS FOR MAY DAY STRIKE

The great strike struggles of 1877, in which tens of thousands of railroad and steel workers militantly fought against the corporations and the government which sent troops to suppress the strikes, left an impress on the whole labor movement. It was

the first great mass action of the American working class on a national scale and, although they were defeated by the combined forces of the State and capital, the American workers emerged from these struggles with a clearer understanding of their class position in society, a greater militancy and a heightened morale. It was in part an answer to the coal barons of Pennsylvania who, in their attempt to destroy the miners' organization in the anthracite region, railroaded ten militant miners (Molly Maguires) to the gallows in 1875.

Although the decade 1880-1890 was generally one of the most active in the development of American industry and the extension of the home market, the year 1884-1885 experienced a depression which was a cyclical depression following the crisis of 1873. The movement for a shorter workday received added impetus from the unemployment and the great suffering which prevailed during that period.

The Federation, just organized, saw the possibility of utilizing the slogan of the 8-hour day as a rallying organization slogan among the great masses of workers who were outside of the Federation and the Knights of Labor, an older and then still growing organization. The Federation appealed to the Knights of Labor for support in the movement for the 8-hour day, realizing that only a general action involving all organized labor, could make possible favorable results.

At the convention of the Federation in 1885, the resolution on the walk-out for May First of the following year was reiterated and several national unions took action to prepare for the struggle, among them particularly the Carpenters and Cigar Makers. The agitation for the May First action for the 8-hour day showed immediate results in the growth of membership of the existing unions. The Knights of Labor grew by leaps and bounds, reaching the apex of its growth in 1886. It is reported that the K. of L., which was better known than the Federation and was considered a fighting organization, increased its membership from 200,000 to nearly 700,000 during that period. The Federation, first to inaugurate the movement and definitely to set a date for the strike for the 8-hour day, also grew in numbers and particularly

in prestige among the broad masses of the workers. As the day of the strike was approaching and it was becoming evident that the leadership of the K. of L., especially Terence Powderly, was sabotaging the movement and even secretly advising its unions not to strike, the popularity of the Federation was still more enhanced. The rank and file of both organizations were enthusiastically preparing for the struggle. Eight-hour day leagues and associations sprang up in various cities and an elevated spirit of militancy was felt throughout the labor movement, which was infecting masses of unorganized workers. A new day was dawning for the American working class.

The best way to learn the mood of the workers is to study the extent and seriousness of their struggles. The number of strikes during a given period is a good indicator of the fighting mood of the workers. The number of strikes during 1885 and 1886 as compared with previous years shows what a spirit of militancy was animating the labor movement. Not only were the workers preparing for action on May First, 1886, but in 1885 the number of strikes already showed an appreciable increase. During the years 1881-1884 the number of strikes and lockouts averaged less than 500, and on the average involved only about 150,000 workers a year. The strikes and lockouts in 1885 increased to about 700 and the number of workers involved jumped to 250,000. In 1886 the number of strikes more than doubled over 1885, attaining as many as 1,572, with a proportional increase in the number of workers affected, now 600,000. How widespread the strike movement became in 1886 can be seen from the fact that while in 1885 there were only 2,467 establishments affected by strikes, the number involved in the following year had increased to 11,562. In spite of open sabotage by the leadership of the K. of L., it was estimated that over 500,000 workers were directly involved in strikes for the 8-hour day.

The strike center was Chicago, where the strike movement was most widespread, but many other cities were involved in the struggle on May First. New York, Baltimore, Washington, Milwaukee, Cincinnati, St. Louis, Pittsburgh, Detroit, and many other cities made a good showing in the walkout. The charac-

teristic feature of the strike movement was that the unskilled and unorganized workers were drawn into the struggle, and that sympathetic strikes were quite prevalent during that period. A rebellious spirit was abroad in the land, and bourgeois historians speak of the "social war" and "hatred for capital" which was manifested during these strikes, and of the enthusiasm of the rank and file which pervaded the movement. It is estimated that about half of the number of workers who struck on May First were successful, and where they did not secure the 8-hour day, they succeeded in appreciably reducing the hours of labor.

THE CHICAGO STRIKE AND HAYMARKET

The May First strike was most aggressive in Chicago, which was at that time the center of a militant Left-wing labor movement. Although insufficiently clear politically on a number of the problems of the labor movement, it was nevertheless a fighting movement, always ready to call the workers to action, develop their fighting spirit in the struggle for the immediate improvement of their living and working conditions.

With the aid of the militant labor groups the strike in Chicago assumed the largest proportions. An 8-hour Association was formed long in advance of the strike to prepare for it. The Central Labor Union, composed of the Left-wing labor unions, gave full support to the 8-hour Association, which was a united front organization, including the unions affiliated to the Federation, the K. of L., and the Socialist Labor Party, the first organized socialist political party of the American working class. On the Sunday before May First the Central Labor Union organized a mobilization demonstration which was attended by 25,000 workers.

On May First, Chicago witnessed a great outpouring of workers, who laid down tools at the call of the organized labor movement of the city. It was the most effective demonstration of class solidarity yet experienced by the labor movement itself. The importance at that time of the demand—the 8-hour day—and the extent and character of the strike gave the movement significant

