

# Mayday 2008

We're celebrating the 122nd anniversary of a General Strike held to win the 8 hour work day. That General Strike of May 1, 1886 was called by the forerunner of the American Federation of Labor and organized throughout the Canada and the US.

On that day 300,000 to half a million workers set down their tools and marched in the largest industrial cities in North America. 80,000 in Chicago, 10,000 in Detroit, New York, St. Louis, etc. In an action of this size happened today, 4 to 6 million would be on strike and 100s of thousands in the streets.

In Milwaukee 7 strikers and witnesses were killed by State Militia and 4 more by Police in Chicago.

On May 4th a rally was held to protest the shootings itself turned violent when police waded into a peaceful crowd and someone threw a bomb into the police line. Shooting broke out and 7 police and at least 4 workers were dead. According to contemporary newspaper reports, most of the police dead were caused by other police fire.

In the aftermath, 7 labor leaders who organized the rally, were arrested for murder of the police. Because of the men's anarchist politics 6 were sentenced to hang and 4 were executed, including one who had been at home with his children at the time of the rally. This Haymarket Affair and subsequent trial was followed throughout the world. It is widely held as one of the worst cases of judicial injustice in American history.

In 1890, Sam Gompers, President of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) requested that the Socialist International call an international day of action agitating for an 8 hour work day. The International agreed and call for international rallies to be held on May First to commemorate the strike of

***World Socialist Party (US)***

1886. This is the origin of Mayday as International Labor Day.

## **Which Labor Day?**

Many incorrectly claim that Mayday is the original Labor Day as opposed to the one held on the first Monday of September in Canada and the US. The September Labor Day had been celebrated for at least 4 years previous to the General Strike of 1886. It was developed by US rank and file unionists from the inspiration from a strike for the 8 hour day held in Toronto in the 1870s (see section on Canada).

So both have much in common and both should be considered as legitimate since both were motivated by a desire to have "8 hours of work, 8 hours of rest and 8 hours for what we will" (from a labor song "Eight Hours").

The beasts that graze the hillside,  
And the birds that wander free,  
In the life that God has meted,  
Have a better life than we.  
Oh, hands and hearts are weary,  
And homes are heavy with dole;  
If our life's to be filled with drudg'ry,  
What need of a human soul.  
Shout, shout the lusty rally,  
From shipyard, shop, and mill.

Eight hours for work, eight hours for rest  
Eight hours for what we will;  
Eight hours for work, eight hours for rest  
Eight hours for what we will.

In other words, both Mayday and Labor Day should be reminders of the need of working people to try and capture the good things in life.

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## **What happened?**

The strike of 1886 was a flop. While hours dropped to 40 hours a week in some skilled trades where unions could control job conditions easily, the increase in unskilled factory work kept working hours at 50-60 per week until the 1930s. It took the desire for post-World War 2 industrial peace to establish the 40 hour week for some years in the 1950-60s.

Today the average workweek in the US is 46 hours and there is an increase in poorer workers working multiple jobs just to get by. This explains which nearly a third of Americans work more than 50 hours a week. Compare this to the legal maximum of 45 hours the British Empire established for Plantation slaves.

## **Read it and weep**

- \* On average, modern Americans work longer than plantation slaves in the 1800s.
- \* Families need close to 2 wage workers to survive vs. 1.3 in the 1880s. So the total amount of work needed to maintain a household has risen.
- \* It's taken us 128 years to lower the working week from 60 hours to 46. That means it will take us another 54 years to reach the 8 hour day.
- \* Using the "Unskilled Wage Index" the \$175 a year factory workers earned in 1886 Chicago would be equivalent of \$22,180 today or slightly more than what American Axle Company is offering it's workers currently on strike.

## **Conclusions?**

Why is it, that despite all the struggles, the marches, the organizing, we are more or less in the similar place as in 1886?

The WSP argues it is because we haven't learned the lessons of the first Mayday and Labor Day. We cannot get the 'life' our class wanted in the 1880s by

confronting the bosses with petition, pickets, pistols or pipe bombs. Each of those strategies assumes we need bosses and they can be intimidated into lessening our poverty.

As Marx first showed, and we have argued since our inception as a political movement, in capitalism, the rich grow richer and all workers can do within capitalism is slow that process down. It is capitalism as a whole system - wages, profits, markets - which needs abolishing. The murder or intimidation of one ruthless boss won't help. Nor will the formal change of the social structure at a particular workplace into a collective, etc. We need to see the enemy as entirety, only then can we make decisions to free ourselves and the world.

## **Mayday 2008**

In 1886 strikers carried banners which stated a simple truth:

"Labor creates all wealth, All wealth belongs to labor"

Working people need to learn and understand that truth. The capitalists need us, capitalism needs us, we do not need it.

The rich will continue to get richer and we will continue to march on Mayday until a majority of us decide that enough is enough. Sure, let's support those who try and defend or increase their wages, but let's face facts, in the long term they aren't going to be any more than what it takes for us to merely survive.

Capitalism is killing us and it is killing the world.

There is enough for all and a decent life can be had only when socialism is established.

## **Abolish the Wage System!**