
The Meaning of May Day:

Address Delivered in Grand Central Palace, New York City — May 1, 1906

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On the 14th day of July, 1899, the first of the new series of International Socialist conventions assembled at Paris. It was a most memorable meeting of battle-scarred veterans of the proletarian revolution, and it signalized the opening of a new and fruitful era in the Socialist movement of the world. The Socialists of France, just recovered from the devastations of the capitalist carnival of blood following the fall of the glorious Commune, were represented by a strong delegation headed by the indomitable Jules Guesde and Paul Lafargue, and the hero of the Commune — Eduard Vaillant. The Germany Social Democracy, still struggling under the weight of the odious Exceptional Laws but already triumphant in the consciousness of approaching victory, had the next largest delegation, headed by that uncompromising “Soldier of the Revolution,” Wilhelm Liebknecht, and the ever youthful, ever enthusiastic leader, August Bebel. The little surviving group of the heroic and martyred band of Russian Terrorists offered its greetings to the world through the venerable Peter Lavrov, while the nascent Socialist labor movement of Russia already spoke in tones of hope and confidence from the mouth of its far-sighted advocate, George Plekhanov. There was England with the immortal William Morris, Austria with the eloquent Victor Adler, Spain with the unswerving Pablo Iglesias, and Italy and Hungary with their famous fighters in the battles of the international proletariat, Amilenre Cipriant and Leo Frankel. There were also represented all other important countries of the old world, and the Socialist workingmen of the United States, still in the infancy of their existence, made there their first appearance in the councils of the Socialist world.

It was this historic gathering that decided to set apart one day of the year as a day of demonstrations by the workingmen of the world in their struggles for a shorter work day, as a demonstration of the

universal solidarity of the working class, and as an international holiday of labor and Socialism.

And no more appropriate day could have been selected for that purpose. The month of May marks the triumph of spring. The frozen and rigid earth relaxes under the warm kisses of the radiant sun. Dumb inanimate nature becomes animate with thousands of new births — the world revives to new, hopeful, and vigorous life.

And what spring is to the changing seasons of the year, Socialism is to the alternating phases of human civilization. Socialism presages the spring of nations. It stands in the development of mankind for the new instead of the old, the living instead of the dead. For the life of well being, peace, and justice that is coming, instead of the life of misery, war, and injustice that is passing. Socialism stands for human progress, and hence its march is irresistible, its triumph unavoidable.

Within the 17 years that lie between that memorable international congress and our own day, the Socialist movement has made some gigantic strides. It has spread to every civilized and semi-civilized country of the world, and has united the best elements of modern society into one powerful international army of many millions. An army of defense and conquest! An army engaged in daily war against tyranny and oppression, and scoring daily victories for freedom and true civilization.

And every recurring May Day celebration since 1890 has recorded new Socialist struggles, new Socialist victories, and withal new Socialist gains and progress. In Germany, France, Belgium, and Austria, the Socialist movement has already become a prime factor in the life of the nations. In England, for many years the pet child and the pride of the exploiting classes of the world, in England, the working class has within the last year risen in powerful revolt against their exploiters, and more than three score radical labor representatives in Parliament eloquently attest the fact that the British workingmen have definitely joined the ranks of the international Socialist proletariat.

But even greater victories than in England Socialism has scored in that darkest of all countries of the world — Russia.

The vast Russian Empire has for centuries been succumbing under the yoke of an oppressive autocracy, which has been crushing all human rights and strangling all manifestations of life of the one hundred and thirty million of its unfortunate inhabitants. In vain were all attempts of the “better classes” of Russia to free their country from the savage clutches of the Romanovs. All such attempts were suppressed by the prison, knout, and the gallows of brutal Russian autocracy, and the dark powers of reaction seemed to have fastened their baneful rule upon the unfortunate people forever. It remained for the

working class, the revolutionary, Socialist workingmen of Russia, to strike the blow which is bound to set their country free. For, notwithstanding the passing victories of the government, the Russian autocracy is doomed, and it was irrevocably doomed from the very day that the great masses of the workingmen rose in open rebellion against it. Just now there is a lull in the active revolutionary struggles in Russia, and the reactionary elements of all countries triumphantly acclaim the defeat of the Russian revolution. In vain is their triumph. the Russian revolution is not dead. The revolutionary workingmen of Russia are still alive, and their number is legion. The working class of Russia, which on January 22, 1905, consecrated the soil of New Russia with the blood of their brethren, wantonly shed by the brutal minions of the Tsar; the working class of Russia which organized the series of brilliant general strikes, and which in the streets of St. Petersburg and on the barricades of Moscow gave conclusive proof of their courage and determination, that working class will rise all other oppressed and exploited classes of the nation, until the last battle between despotism and liberty will have been fought, until the last vestige of accursed Tsardom will have been destroyed, and a social and democratic republic will have been established in Russia. May our next May Day celebration witness the accomplishment of these inevitable events.

And we, on our part, pledge ourselves to our comrades in Russia and their envoys among us, Maxim Gorky, Nicholas Chaikovsky, and Gregory Maxim, that we will support them morally and financially, and with every means at our command in the great struggle which is not their own, but that of the entire working class and of all liberty loving men and women of the world.

It behooves us on this international holiday to remember the work and achievements of our comrades abroad. Their triumphs fill us with new inspiration, their struggles fill us with new courage and enthusiasm. But in doing this we should not forget our own triumphs and our struggles, here at home. For we have had our ample and honest share of both.

When we look back to the conditions of the Socialist movement in the United States five years ago, and compare it with the movement today, we have every reason to exult in our progress and to look to the future with hope and confidence.

A few years ago the American Socialist movement was a weak, powerless infant; today it is a healthy, vigorous youth buoyant with life and spirits and rapidly growing into mature manhood. A few years ago the standard of Socialism in this country was held by a small men regarded as visionaries and fools, today half a million citizens of the United States, scattered over all states and territories of the Union,

loudly and proudly proclaim themselves Socialists. Socialism has become the only real issue in our national life: it animates our public press and public assemblies, it agitates our churches and our schools, it influences our politics and morals — it is the only movement in the country that still stands for the true democratic and republican ideals of our country. And at no time was this fact demonstrated more clearly and conclusively than just now, when the Socialist Party inaugurated almost single-handedly the great war against the foul class murder contemplated by the capitalist interests in Idaho and Colorado. I referee, of course, to the case of our comrades in the Caldwell penitentiary, Moyer, Haywood, and Pettibone. Nor will I at this time enter into a discourse on the facts and equities of this world-stirring case. But I will call your attention to just one significant feature of it. Here two state governors of our country, both mine owners and capitalists, aided by a professional Pinkerton detective and thug and a self-confessed murderer, take it upon themselves to brand an organization of 100,000 workingmen as a criminal combination, and their officers as murderers; they kidnap three citizens of one state and deport them to another in defiance of law and constitution; they confine them in a prison reserved for convicted criminals, and openly proclaim their determination to have them hanged; they strike a brutal blow at the very foundation of our republic — the personal security of the citizen; they put to shame the darkest deeds of Russian autocracy, and — not a protest, not a murmur from the dominant classes of our country with its much boasted liberty and justice.

It remained for the Socialists to raise their voice in ringing indignant protest against this contemplated prostitution of justice. It was the Socialists in this country who first called a halt to the nefarious purposes of the “law and order” vandals, and called to them in a voice of thunder: “Thou Shalt Not Kill!”

And so effective was the agitation inaugurated by the Socialists that hundreds of thousands of workingmen all over the country are today arrayed against the conspirators of Idaho and Colorado, and all decent, honest elements of the country are rapidly joining their protests to that of the working class.

In the opinion of the great mass of our people the conspiring governors of the West are the accused and their victims are the accusers.

The grand jury of Canyon County, a body of sixteen men carefully picked out by the servile judge in Boise, has found an indictment against Moyer, Haywood, and Pettibone, charging them with complicity in the murder of the former governor of Idaho, Frank Steunenberg. By this indictment the grand jurors do not say that the men are actually guilty of the heinous crime, but they say there is enough evidence to lead to the belief that the accused might have

committed the crime charged. There is a greater jury than the grand jury of Canyon County; a stern incorruptible, and unpurchasable jury — the jury of the people of the United States. And from this meeting and the thousands of other meetings held through the length and breadth of the land, this jury says to Governor Gooding of Idaho and Governor McDonald of Colorado and to the Pinkerton detective McParland: “There are sufficient reasons to believe that you have entered into a conspiracy to commit cold-blooded murder in order to discredit and destroy a powerful labor organization; we have found an indictment against you, and we will watch you and scrutinize you, and if we find you guilty, we will see to it that you do not consummate your foul purposes.”

This great object, this sublime idea, are the features of our May Day this year. Our next May Day celebration will attest the triumphant acquittal of our persecuted comrades, and the branding of the names of their persecutors on the pillory of eternal disgrace and everlasting infamy.

Down with oppression in all countries of the world; down with class wars and class murders! Long live Liberty and Justice; long live International Socialism!

Edited by Tim Davenport

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