OMNI

MAY DAY/ INTERNATIONAL WORKERS’ DAY
NEWSLETTER #3, May 1, 2015.

Compiled by Dick Bennett for a CULTURE OF PEACE, JUSTICE, ECOLOGY. WE, THE PEOPLE.

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OMNI’S NATIONAL/INTERNATIONAL DAYS PROJECT

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May Day

May Day: thousands across US demand racial justice at rallies for workers' rights
Thousands of Americans set out to march under the banners of “black lives matter” and “no justice no peace” on Friday, merging the movement against police abuses with May Day’s 124-year crusade for workers’ rights.

In New York, thousands rallied in downtown Manhattan, demanding “disarm the NYPD” in the wake of the police killings of Freddie Gray in Baltimore and other black men around the country.

Protesters also called for a minimum wage hike to $15, restrictions on carbon emissions and an end to tax loopholes for the wealthiest Americans.

“The thing about racial justice, and the reason that the movement has space for the fight for 15 [dollar minimum wage] and workplace issues is that we’re all people, and this is a people problem,” said Sabaah Jordan, an organizer who did not plan the May Day events but said she would take part.

“Black people are workers too, and the racism and injustice that we see in the police we have to deal with in the workplace too,” she said. “When we say ‘black lives matter’, we’re really addressing justice, not just with police.

“Racial exploitation is a critical issue, and confronting it is really creating a society for everyone. ‘Black lives matter’ is a sweeping statement.”

The rally paused in major parks and squares, where participants made special calls for immigrant workers’ rights and the prosecution of police officers who have killed
unarmed black men in recent years. Activists and university students also gathered at the Guggenheim to “occupy” the museum and protest against brutal working conditions in Abu Dhabi, where the museum plans to build an expansion.

Police dispersed a group of 30 or 40 protesters who demanded that the museum’s trustees hear their concerns. About a dozen remained, forming a small circle in the museum’s lobby in a standoff with two officers. Andrew Ross, one of the organizers with Gulf Labor Artist Coalition, said that they wanted workers to have the right to organize without fear of retaliation, and that workers had been deported for speaking out.

New School student Viannie Bell, 25, said she wanted to learn as much about the cause as possible. “I believe in advocacy,” Bell said. “I believe that we should advocate for those whose voices can’t be heard. I believe in fair treatment and fair wages.”

New York University students also planned a sit-in on their campus to protest against the treatment of workers at NYU’s Abu Dhabi campus, near where protesters planned to “shut it down for Freddie Gray” in Union Square in the evening. Earlier on Friday state attorney Marilyn Mosby said that the six officers involved in Gray’s death will face criminal charges in Baltimore.

In Los Angeles, immigrants’ rights took top billing alongside the campaign against police killings in two parallel marches, the Full Rights March and the International Workers’ March. Police cordoned off wide swaths of the city to accommodate the massive crowds.

Jorge-Mario Cabrera, a spokesman for the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles, said that the the union of movements was a natural fit. “We’ve been engaging with local groups to really look at what are some of the commonalities of the two struggles,” he said. “Immigrant community folks are detained and beat up too; mass incarceration isn’t anything new to both of our communities.

“We want to make sure that that’s understood and make it understood that we can’t do this alone.”

Farther north, the San Francisco longshore union declined to work the ports of the Bay Area, calling for a march through Oakland. In a statement, ILWU Local 10 said its members were “outraged by the recent escalation in police brutality throughout the US that has resulted in the needless killing of innocent and unarmed minorities”.

A demonstrator, who declined to give his name, holds a sign against gentrification during a May Day protest in Oakland, California. Photograph: Noah Berger/REUTERS

Protesters also sought to “block the tech commute” by gathering at the train and bus stations where Facebook, Google and Apple employees go to commute.

“The rich have begun colonizing North Oakland, West Oakland, and Downtown,” a Facebook post for the event reads, decrying “their tech buses, their pricey cafes, and their luxury apartments.

“Let them know that they are not welcome, that their high-priced world is not welcome, and their terrible world of surveillance and alienation must end,” the post continues. Teamster bus drivers pleaded with the protesters not to disrupt traffic, and the protest appeared to fizzle out. Attendee Andrew James Rahman complained that the buses were simply re-routed and the protest was disorganized.

But hundreds came out for organized marches in Philadelphia, Boston and Detroit, where organizers made diverse appeals for an end to water shutoffs, tax foreclosures and tax loopholes. In Chicago, the city that inspired the occasion, the city’s May Day Radical Coalition exhorted “all anti-capitalists, radical unionists, anarchists, socialists and working class militants to come to the march” starting at the city’s Union Park.

International Workers’ Day was created to commemorate the 1886 Haymarket riot, when a peaceful workers’ strike turned into a violent clash with officers after someone threw a bomb at police; eight anarchists were convicted for murder afterward.
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Al Jazeera - 12 hours ago

Andrew McFadyen | 04 May 2015 12:39 GMT | Elections, Scotland, United Kingdom, Europe. All Social.

2. May Day's meaning: How it unfolded in Seattle

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3. Seattle police say prepared for more protests

Reuters - 2 days ago

4. May Day 2015 - India Public Holidays

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5. May Day 2015: Violence Erupts Around The Globe On ...

International Business Times

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International Workers Day 2015: Why Doesn’t The US Celebrate May Day?

By Cole Stangler @colestangler on May 01 2015. International Business Times.

Workers Day is shunned in the United States for its ties to the anarchist and communist movements. In this photo, Spaniards march in Madrid. Reuters/Susana Vera

As most of the world -- from Dublin to Dhaka -- celebrates International Workers Day on Friday, with demonstrations, commemorations and vacations for the working class, Americans are toiling away on the job. Why hasn’t May Day caught on here? In two words, anarchists and communists.

The United States’ absence -- almost alone among nations -- from the international festivities is all the more ironic, since the day has American origins. On May 1, 1886, workers in Chicago, many of them immigrants, walked out of their jobs en masse, striking for an eight-hour work day. A few days later, at a labor rally in Haymarket Square, a bomb exploded, killing 11 people, including seven police officers. Four anarchists were hanged, on flimsy evidence, and the general strike dissipated.

A few years later, in Europe, a newly formed collection of socialist and labor parties called for a demonstration on May 1 to honor the “Haymarket Martyrs” and sustain the struggle for an eight-hour work day. Over the years, the cause evolved into a broader celebration of labor unions and workers’ rights and spread around the world. Governments -- and not just Communist ones -- embraced the day as a public holiday: Workers in Kenya, Brazil, India, France, Germany and elsewhere all have the day off.

But things took a different path stateside. Worried about the political threat of anarchists and socialists, President Grover Cleveland latched on to another day celebrated by some, more moderate trade unionists and proclaimed the first Monday in September as Labor Day in 1894. Although radicals occasionally tried to revive May Day, most U.S. unions, like those in the American Federation of Labor, did not.

“They're not seeing themselves as part of a broader internationalist movement,” says Jacob Remes, a labor history professor at State University of New York Empire State College. “They
were skilled white men, they’re more conservative, their unionism is reformist.”

Not only is Workers Day not celebrated in the United States. Public authorities have managed to recast the symbolically charged day into the national struggle against left-wing radicalism and communism. In 1955, at the height of the Cold War, Congress passed a bill calling on President Dwight Eisenhower to proclaim May 1 as “Loyalty Day.” (Three years later, he proclaimed “Law Day.”) The proclamations, which the White House continues to this day, originated as swipes at the Soviet Union and its showy May Day military marches. But they also gestured toward the internal threat of domestic communists and their fellow travelers -- both of which were targeted by Sen. Joseph McCarthy, the House Un-American Activities Committee and their sympathizers.

Loyalty Day and Law Day built on earlier commemorations of “Americanization Day,” first organized by the Veterans of Foreign Wars on May 1, 1921. That took place in the immediate aftermath of the first Red Scare after World War I, an era marked by mounting nativist sentiment, a nationwide resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan and anxieties over the Russian Revolution. Immigrants made up a large part of the new Communist Party, which put an emphasis on organizing African-Americans and dismantling Jim Crow.

“You can’t separate the anti-radicalism from nativism and white supremacy. They’re always intertwined in the United States,” says Jacob Remes.

Echoes of May Day occasionally resound today. In 2006, when hundreds of thousands of immigrants decided to protest for immigration reform, they chose to strike on May 1. Three years ago, on the same day, the Occupy movement held a series of demonstrations. And this year, dockworkers in Oakland plan a brief work stoppage in solidarity with ongoing protests against police brutality. American presidents, too, continue to sign annual proclamations for Loyalty Day and Law Day. On Thursday night, President Obama opted for the latter.

International Workers' Day (also known as May Day) is a celebration of the international labour movement and left-wing movements.

In the news

2. SA May Day rally supports workers' rights

KSAT San Antonio - 3 days ago

3. Southwest Workers' Union joins May Day March

San Antonio Express-News - 3 days ago

More news for International Workers Day 2015

4. International Workers Day 2015: Why Doesn't The US ...

www.ibtimes.com/international-workers-day...

International Business Times

3 days ago - Workers Day is shunned in the United States for its ties to the anarchist and communist movements. In this photo, Spaniards march in Madrid.

5. International Workers' Day - 1 May 2015 | PSI

www.world-psi.org › ... › Media › All News

Public Services International

4 days ago - International Workers' Day - 1 May 2015. 28 April 2015. Police use water cannon againt protestors in Daegu, Korea. International Workers' Day ...

6. International Workers' Day - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_Workers'_Day

Wikipedia

This article is about International Workers' Day on 1 May, a holiday sometimes ..... Currently (2015), it is honored by every single organization in Pakistan to give ...

History - Africa - Americas - Asia

7. Global Public Holiday: May Day | Office Holidays

www.officeholidays.com/countries/global/may_day.php

Who observes Labour Day in 2015? Algeria · Argentina ... The holiday may also be known as Labour Day or International Worker's Day. The 1 May date is used ...

8. Labour Day 2015: International Workers' Day celebrated in ...

www.independent.co.uk/.../labour-day-2015-internatio...

The Independent

4 days ago - Google is honouring Labour Day with a new Google Doodle on its global

www.indiacelebrating.com/events/international-labour-day/

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10. International Workers' Day | Global Dimension

globaldimension.org.uk/calendar/event/4455

International Workers' Day. 01 May 2015. 1 May every year: Celebrating the international labour movement. Also known as May Day, this Day celebrates the ...

11. Labour Day: 5 Fast Facts You Need to Know | Heavy.com

heavy.com/.../2015/.../labour-day-2015-google-doodle-celebration-phot...

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NEWS CARRIED OVER FROM PREVIOUS YEARS

FAYETTEVILLE, AR

Next Monday, April 28, 2014, OMNI allies are invited to join Workers Justice Center
workers and friends to commemorate the lives of workers killed on the job. A preventable tragedy that leaves tragedy in its wake.

Candlelight Vigil
6:00 pm at the Workers Justice Center at 207 W. Emma in Springdale.
Light refreshments follow

(Also the annual Cesar Chavez Banquet is May 2. See below for details)

Gladys Tiffany
OMNI Center for Peace, Justice & Ecology
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Worker Memorial Day Ceremony

This Monday, April 28th, you are invited to join the Workers' Justice Center in a candlelight vigil to remember those who died at work in Arkansas this past year.

In Arkansas from January 2013 to now, 32 workers have died on the job from injuries that could have been prevented. At the national level, more than 50,000 workers die every year due to work-related injuries and illnesses, according to "Preventable Deaths 2014," a report produced by the National Council on Occupational Safety and Health. Far too many more have suffered non-fatal but life-changing injuries.

This Workers' Memorial Day, we will join churches, unions, worker centers, city governments, and other communities all over the country to remember those who have died at work, and to re-commit ourselves to improving safety conditions in Arkansas and worldwide. Please join us on Monday to remember the dead and continue fighting for the living.

What: A Workers' Memorial Day vigil to commemorate those who died on the job in Arkansas this past year

When: Monday, April 28th, from 6pm-6:45pm, followed by light refreshments

Where: Outside the Workers' Justice Center at 207 W. Emma Ave. in Springdale

Who: The NWA community of workers, allies, and faith leaders

The ceremony will include a reading of names of workers who lost their lives in 2013, and will be followed by a small reception to learn about upcoming trainings on workplace hazards.

Join us!!!
Friday May 2, 6:00-8:30 pm at St. Paul's Episcopal Church

A heartwarming fundraiser that supports the Worker's Justice Center in representing and empowering low wage workers in Northwest Arkansas. $25 for wonderful homecooked international meal, and talk by Monica Ramirez, Sub Director for the Center for Migrant Rights in Atlanta. Contact Workers Justice for tickets—479-750-8015.

SPEECH BY LIONELD JORDAN, LABOR DAY 2012

Yesterday morning I attended a Labor Day breakfast sponsored by the Northwest Arkansas Workers Justice Center at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church. And today, I am honored to be here to talk with Unitarians about a subject dear to my heart—The Dignity of Labor.

In too many political circles and boardrooms, labor is a controversial concept. I find I am on the side of protecting citizen rights and their ability to earn a decent wage to support their families instead of being on the side of supporting corporate welfare through tax dollars for the sole purpose of increasing corporate profits without any accountability.

We must ask how and in what ways do our laws sponsor a poor working class and work to limit profits for the many.
Why have labor unions traditionally been on the side of defense and rarely on the offense? Labor unions have done much to build and grow our nation, and their strength has made for 40-hour work week, the elimination of child labor, the creation of workplace safety codes, and they continue to fight for equal pay for equal work and better working conditions to lessen the high number of unnecessary deaths and injuries at the workplace.

Labor unions are needed because they provide a unified sounding-board to argue for better working conditions and jobs that pay a living wage and a fair wage for workers.

The first labor union organized in Arkansas was the Typographical Union at the Arkansas Gazette in 1865. The Knights of Labor founded their first local at Hot Springs in 1882, and the Arkansas Federation of Labor was established in 1904.

Before that, from the creation of Arkansas Territory in 1819 until the Civil War, the major labor force consisted of slaves with no rights, no protection, and certainly no union, while the planter interests were assured and advanced by actions of state and federal governments. There was seldom any complaint from Arkansas religious leaders, but the slaves often drew upon spirituals that mirrored and told their story.

Labor activists have repeatedly drawn from biblical imagery to lead the struggle for economic justice, which could be due in large part to a great mass of U.S. workers holding religious convictions that were not easily stripped away or transmuted into a mindless obedience to the power of the wealthy.
They worked together for meritorious goals such as ending child labor and securing safe conditions on the job, healthcare and retirement benefits, unemployment insurance, workers compensation for on-the-job injuries, and a 40-hour week with overtime pay.

Most importantly, they have demanded dignity at work.

People of faith helped organize workers, joined workers on picket lines, brought food to striking families, and advocated for better wages and living conditions of workers.

For men and women sweating through 80-hour work weeks, their version of Christianity was one that leveled God's condemnation on the new titans of industry, the Carnegies, Rockefellers, Vanderbilts, and Jay Goulds, accumulated vast fortunes. The Lord the workers worshipped was a simple carpenter—a common laborer like themselves.

At a key point in the 1880s, James Cardinal Gibbons wrote to the Pope to dissuade him from issuing a condemnation of the Knights of Labor.

Bishop Edward Fitzgerald of Little Rock also supported the cause of the Arkansas Knights of Labor and expressed his appreciation to Cardinal Gibbons for his support of labor unions.

In 1905, Father Thomas Hagerty of Van Buren, Arkansas, was a founding member of the Industrial Workers of the World and wrote the Preamble of the I.W.W. Constitution.
The Preamble declared, “There can be no peace so long as hunger and want are found among millions of the working people and the few, who make up the employing class, have all the good things of life.”

Hagerty’s formal association with the church had ended when he was suspended by his archbishop for urging miners in Colorado to revolt in 1903, then he served as editor of the American labor Union’s newspaper, the Voice of Labor.

The first decades of the 20th Century were a time of heightened awareness of poverty and social inequality.

The Social Gospel theme was reflected in the novels In His Steps (1897) and The Reformer (1902), by the Christian Socialist and Congregational minister Charles Sheldon, who coined today’s popular question, “What Would Jesus Do?”

In an effort to transform the social order and address human suffering, members of the Methodist Church created the Methodist Federation for Social Action. Harry F. Ward led the group for almost 40 years. During the 1920's and 1930's this leadership was fully shared by Winifred Chappell, a deaconess and devoted advocate for the workers' struggle, who taught for several years at Commonwealth College, a labor school in Arkansas.

The economic collapse in 1929 shocked many more in the churches to activism—encouraging a closer alliance with working people.
Courageous young ministers Howard Kester, Claude Williams, and Ward Rodgers came to Arkansas to advance the cause of workers in the 1930s.

Kester worked to organize the Southern Tenant Farmers Union, the Fellowship of Southern Churchmen, and the Committee on Economic and Racial Justice. Claude Williams organized coal miners in Johnson County, the unemployed in Sebastian County, and the tenant farmers in eastern Arkansas, which led to his kidnapping and beating by plantation bosses near Earle.

Ward Rodgers was arrested, jailed, and convicted of anarchy for giving a speech at an organizing rally for tenant farmers in Marked Tree.

They also joined with African-American Baptist ministers E.B. McKinney and Owen Whitfield to try to pull sharecroppers in the Delta out from under the crushing system of debt.

The Southern Tenant Farmers Union faced lynchings and the terror of a government-sponsored Jim Crow justice system and, therefore, met with only partial success.

In 1936, Dorothy Day, Editor of the *Catholic Worker*, came to the Arkansas delta and wrote in support of the inter-racial Southern Tenant Farmers Union.

Then came the 1940s, and our government began enacting laws, particularly the Taft-Hartley Act, intended to kill the power of workers—the government lessened the ability of workers to organize and contract for better job conditions and wages, then came laws to further subsidize wealthy corporate
Laws were passed that caused worker intimidation.

Right-to-work laws and at-will-employment laws made it easier for employers to fire workers for no cause or even a morally-wrong cause (such as trying to organize a labor union), and treaties were passed that encouraged the outsourcing of U.S. jobs overseas.

While governments were busy passing laws to limit worker rights, Reverend and Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr., and other ministers made it their mission to continue to help the working poor, particularly to change the laws that provided an unequal status on the basis of race.

The Southern Christian Leadership Conference began planning a program of massive civil disobedience by an army of trained nonviolence activists.

However, during the height of his success, King was gunned down in Memphis after speaking at a union rally for sanitation workers, members of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees.

“All Labor Has Dignity” is a collection of speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. King literally gave his life up for laborers.

Dr. King fought for my union brothers and sisters. I served for many years as President of AFSCME while working for 27 years as a carpenter and later a Zone Supervisor at the University of Arkansas.

King fought for labor rights and economic justice.
Economic justice—I encourage you today in honor of Labor Day to begin making those words a regular part of your speech.

Economic justice. It sounds so simple, yet has so many enemies. Reverend King warned of that which will desensitize you to the burning problems of the less fortunate—to avoid encasing our fighting tradition in a plastic frame and hang it on our wall.

He is right to praise those who stand up when a battle for decency is waging, and make ourselves a part of it.

Economic justice has dignity.

The ability to act on dreams and The Dream Act have dignity.

Equal pay for equal work has dignity.

Admitting the truth when a laborer has a work injury has dignity.

And, all labor has dignity.
May first is often called May Day for various reasons, but it is also International Workers’ Day. The date chosen is in commemoration of the Chicago Haymarket Massacre, an incident which began with a labor demonstration on May 1, 1886 in which 35,000 workers walked off their jobs to demand an eight-hour workday. Escalating tensions led to clashes with police, and on May fourth, someone threw a firebomb that led to a gunfight. Eight police officers and an undetermined number of civilians were killed.

Police arrested hundreds of people, but never determined the identity of the bomb thrower. Amidst public clamor for revenge, however, eight anarchists, including prominent speakers and writers, were tried for murder. The partisan Judge Joseph E. Gary conducted the trial, and all 12 jurors acknowledged prejudice against the defendants. Lacking credible evidence that the defendants threw the bomb or organized the bomb throwing, prosecutors focused on their writings and speeches. The jury, instructed to adopt a conspiracy theory without legal precedent, convicted all eight. Seven were sentenced to death. The trial is now considered one of the worst miscarriages of justice in American history.

Many Americans were outraged at the verdicts, but legal appeals failed. Two death sentences were commuted, but on November 11, 1887, four defendants were hanged in the Cook County jail; one committed suicide. Hundreds of thousands turned out for the funeral procession of the five dead men. In 1893, Governor John Peter Altgeld granted the three imprisoned defendants absolute pardon, citing the lack of evidence against them and the unfairness of the trial.

Noam Chomsky, “May Day”

Zuccotti Park Press, Truthout, April 30, 2012: "People seem to know about May Day everywhere except where it began, here in the United States of America. That's because those in power have done
everything they can to erase its real meaning. For example, Ronald Reagan designated what he called 'Law Day' - a day of jingoist fanaticism, like an extra twist of the knife in the labor movement. Today, there is a renewed awareness, energized by the Occupy movement's organizing, around May Day, and its relevance for reform and perhaps eventual revolution."

Read the Article  http://truth-out.org/opinion/item/8809-may-day

**Occupy Activists Resurrect May Day for Americans**  Peter Dreier  
*April 27, 2012*

(AP Photo/John Minchillo)

Unlike the rest of the world’s democracies, the United States doesn’t use the metric system, doesn’t require employers to provide workers with paid vacations, hasn’t abolished the death penalty, and doesn’t celebrate May Day as an official national holiday.

Body Block - Left

**About the Author**

**Peter Dreier**

Peter Dreier teaches at Occidental College and is author of the forthcoming The 100 Greatest Americans of the 20th...

**Also by the Author**

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The National Labor Relations Board has leveled charges against the College for violating federal labor law.

**Peter Dreier**

**Is the Perfect Factory Possible?** (Sweatshops, Wages and Hours, Working Conditions)

Anti-sweatshop activists are embracing Alta Gracia, a company that is going head-to-head
with brands like Nike to sell socially responsible clothing on college campuses.

Peter Dreier

4 comments

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Company Labor Issues May Day Social Issues War

Outside the US, May 1 is international workers’ day, observed with speeches, rallies, and demonstrations. Ironically, this celebration of working-class solidarity originated in the US labor movement in the United States and soon spread around the world, but it never earned official recognition in this country. Since 2006, however, American unions and immigrant rights activists have resurrected May 1 as a day of protest. And this year, in the wake of Occupy Wall Street and the rebirth of a national movement for social justice, a wide spectrum of activist groups will be out in the streets to give voice to the growing crusade for democracy and equality.

The original May Day was born of the movement for an eight-hour workday. After the Civil War, unregulated capitalism ran rampant in America. It was the Gilded Age, a time of merger mania, increasing concentration of wealth, and growing political influence by corporate power brokers known as Robber Barons. New technologies made possible new industries, which generated great riches for the fortunate few, but at the expense of workers, many of them immigrants, who worked long hours, under dangerous conditions, for little pay.

As the gap between the rich and other Americans widened dramatically, workers began to resist in a variety of ways. The first major wave of labor unions pushed employers to limit the workday to ten, then eight, hours. The 1877 strike by tens of thousands of railroad, factory and mine workers—which shut down the nation’s major industries and was brutally
suppressed by the corporations and their friends in government—was the first of many mass actions to demand living wages and humane working conditions. By 1884, the campaign had gained enough momentum that the predecessor to the American Federation of Labor adopted a resolution at its annual meeting, “that eight hours shall constitute legal day’s labor from and after May 1, 1886.”

On the appointed date, unions and radical groups orchestrated strikes and large-scale demonstrations in cities across the country. More than 500,000 workers went on strike or marched in solidarity and many more people protested in the streets. In Chicago, a labor stronghold, at least 30,000 workers struck. Rallies and parades across the city more than doubled that number, and the May 1 demonstrations continued for several days. The protests were mostly nonviolent, but they included skirmishes with strikebreakers, company-hired thugs and police. On May 3, at a rally outside the McCormick Harvesting Machine Company factory, police fired on the crowd, killing at least two workers. The next day, at a rally at Haymarket Square to protest the shootings, police moved in to clear the crowd. Someone threw a bomb at the police, killing at least one officer. Another seven policemen were killed during the ensuing riot, and police gunfire killed at least four protesters and injured many others. After a controversial investigation, seven anarchists were sentenced to death for murder, while another was sentenced to fifteen years in prison. The anarchists won global notoriety, being seen as martyrs by many radicals and reformers, who viewed the trial and executions as politically motivated.

Within a few years, unions and radical groups around the world had established May Day as an international holiday to commemorate the Haymarket martyrs and continue the struggle for the eight-hour day, workers’ rights and social justice.
In the United States, however, the burgeoning Knights of Labor, uneasy with May Day’s connection to anarchists and other radicals, adopted another day to celebrate workers’ rights. In 1887, Oregon was the first state to make Labor Day an official holiday, celebrated in September. Other states soon followed. Unions sponsored parades to celebrate Labor Day, but such one-day festivities didn’t make corporations any more willing to grant workers decent conditions. To make their voices heard, workers had to resort to massive strikes, typically put down with brutal violence by government troops.

In 1894, the American Railway Union, led by Eugene Debs, went on strike against the Pullman Palace Car Company to demand lower rents (Pullman was a company town that owned its employees’ homes) and higher pay following huge layoffs and wage cuts. In solidarity with the Pullman workers, railroad workers across the country boycotted the trains with Pullman cars, paralyzing the nation’s economy as well as its mail service. President Grover Cleveland declared the strike a federal crime and called out 12,000 soldiers to break the strike. They crushed the walkout and killed at least two protesters. Six days later, Cleveland—facing worker protests for his repression of the Pullman strikers—signed a bill creating Labor Day as an official national holiday in September. He hoped that giving the working class a day off to celebrate one Monday a year might pacify them.

For most of the twentieth century, Labor Day was reserved for festive parades, picnics and speeches sponsored by unions in major cities. But contrary to what President Cleveland had hoped, American workers, their families and allies, found other occasions to mobilize for better working conditions and a more humane society. America witnessed massive strike waves throughout the century, including militant general strikes and occupations in 1919 (including a general strike in Seattle), during the Depression (the 1934 San Francisco general
strike, led by the longshoremen’s union; a strike of about 400,000 textile workers that same year; and militant sit-down strikes by autoworkers in Flint, Michigan, women workers at Woolworth’s department stores in New York, aviation workers in Los Angeles and others in 1937) and 1946 (which witnessed the largest strike wave in US history, triggered by pent-up demands following World War II). The feminist, civil rights, environmental and gay rights movements drew important lessons from these labor tactics.

Meanwhile, May 1 faded away as a day of protest. From the 1920s through the 1950s, radical groups, including the Communist Party, sought to keep the tradition alive with parades and other events, but the mainstream labor movement and most liberal organizations kept their distance, making May Day an increasingly marginal affair. In 1958, in the midst of the cold war, President Dwight Eisenhower proclaimed May 1 as Loyalty Day. Each subsequent president has issues a similar proclamation, although few Americans know about or celebrate the day.

In 2001, unions and immigrant rights groups in Los Angeles resurrected May Day as an occasion for protest. The first few years saw rallies with several hundred participants, but in 2006 the numbers skyrocketed. That year, millions of people in over 100 cities—including more than a million in Los Angeles, 200,000 in New York and 300,000 in Chicago — participated in May Day demonstrations. The huge turnout was catalyzed by a bill, sponsored by Representative James Sensenbrenner Jr. (R-Wisconsin) and passed by the House the previous December, that would have classified as a felon anyone who helped undocumented immigrants enter or remain in the United States. In many cities, the protest, which organizers termed the “Great American Boycott,” triggered walkouts by high school students and shut down businesses that depended on immigrant workers. Since then, immigrant workers and
their allies have adopted May Day as an occasion for protest.

America is now in the midst of a new Gilded Age with a new group of corporate Robber Barons, many of them operating on a global scale. The top of the income scale has the biggest concentration of income and wealth since 1928. Several decades of corporate-backed assaults on unions have left only 7 percent of private sector employees with union cards. More than half of America’s 15 million union members now work for government (representing 37 percent of all government employees), so business groups and conservative politicians have targeted public sector unions for destruction. The past year’s attacks on teachers, cops, firefighters, human service workers and other public sector workers in Wisconsin, Ohio and elsewhere—the most ferocious anti-union crusade in decades—have catalyzed a tremendous sense of urgency among union workers and millions of other Americans who’ve seen their standard of living plummet while the richest Americans and big business plunder the economy.

The Occupy Wall Street movement’s success can be measured in part by how public opinion has changed about such issues as corporate profits, widening inequality and excessive executive compensation. By last December, two months after the first occupations at Zuccotti Park, 77 percent of Americans—and 53 percent of Republicans—agreed that “there is too much power in the hands of a few rich people and corporations,” according to a Pew Research Center survey. The Pew study also found that 61 percent of Americans believe that “the economic system in this country unfairly favors the wealthy” and that 57 percent think that wealthy people don’t pay their fair share of taxes. Most of these people won’t be found protesting in the streets, but the nation’s changing mood clearly influences what candidates for office and elected officials think they need to do to satisfy public opinion.
This year, in the wake of Occupy Wall Street, and in the midst of a presidential election 
contest, activists from around the country are ramping up the May Day festivities.

Feeling a new wave of anger and activism among their rank-and-file, unions will be taking to 
the streets this May Day. In Los Angeles, for example, the County Federation of Labor will 
augment the downtown immigrant rights rally with a series of protest actions led by different 
unions and their allies. The Teamsters will sponsor a demonstration at a waste sorting facility 
owned by American Reclamation, which is infamous for treating its immigrant workers like 
garbage. The action is part of the Teamsters campaign, in partnership with environmental and 
community groups, to not only organize workers in recycling plants but also to push the city 
government to regulate waste collection and recycling. UNITE HERE will bring thousands of 
hotel workers to Long Beach, where they are organizing several nonunion hotels, to rally and 
collect signatures for a “living wage” ballot measure. Supported by SEIU, LA’s 8,000 
unionized janitors, who will be out in force to demand a better contract from the mega-
corporations that own the area’s office buildings, may announce a county-wide strike on May 
Day. SEIU’s airport workers affiliate will be spending May Day engaged in protest and civil 
disobedience at Los Angeles International Airport to challenge efforts by major airlines to 
jeopardize employees health and safety.

In April, a coalition of unions, environmental groups, community organizing networks —
including National People’s Action, PICO, the Alliance of Californians for Community 
Empowerment, Jobs with Justice, National Domestic Workers Alliance, Rainforest Action 
Network, SEIU, United Food and Commercial Workers, AFL-CIO, Communication Workers of 
America, MoveOn, Unite Here, Common Cause, the Steelworkers union Public Campaign, 
Public Citizen, Health Care for America Now, the United States Students Association, and
others—began a series of protest actions major banks and corporations, and trained close to 100,000 new recruits in civil disobedience tactics.

In April they showed up (and some got arrested) at Cigna, General Electric and Wells Fargo shareholder meetings. In the next month, they plan to make their voices heard at Verizon, Bank of America, Hyatt, Tesoro, Sallie Mae, Walmart and other corporate annual meetings. They will commemorate May Day with actions at several corporate headquarters and stockholder meetings as part of this ongoing “99% Spring/99% Power” campaign that will continue throughout the summer and into the election season with demands that corporations pay their fair share of taxes, big banks end the epidemic of foreclosures and reduce “underwater” mortgages to their fair market values, and that banks and Congress unleash college students from unprecedented debt from student loans. By keeping the heat on, and gaining visibility, they hope to inject these issues into the upcoming election season.

The Occupy movement will relaunch its protest actions with May Day actions. Occupy affiliates in some cities have called for a May Day “general strike” to demand jobs for all, immigrant rights, a moratorium on foreclosures, and recognition of housing, education and health care as human rights. Although talk of a nationwide general strike is certainly premature, many Occupy activists will join with unions and community groups this spring and summer as part of broad mobilizations to take advantage of the nation’s growing “99 percent vs. 1 percent” mood.

“It was mostly immigrants who led the first May Day movement for the 8 hour day. Now a new generation of immigrant workers have revitalized and brought May Day back to life,” observed María Elena Durazo, the feisty head of the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor who enthusiastically embraced the Occupy movement in her city. “Progressives around the
country, working on all kinds of issues, have embraced the new May Day movement. It isn’t just about immigrant rights. It isn’t just about workers rights on the job or even about raising the standard of living for all workers. It’s about what kind of country we want to be.

Peter Dreier April 27, 2012

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