

# RED & BLACK NOTES

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## May Day: A Traditional Workers' Holiday

This May Day, Canadian workers are being asked to consider which of our rulers will lead us into the next millennium. Before we pass comment on some of the available choices it is necessary to ask where do Canadian workers stand today?

The post-war labour consensus has truly broken down. In the decades after the Second World War workers in Canada, bolstered by a strong combative sense and an expanding economy looked forward to annual salary increases and a generally improving standard of living. Yet, in the past decade and a half this picture has been reversed. By slashing payrolls and benefits, gutting social programmes and reciting a mantra of deficit hysteria employers have sought to reverse the gains made by working people since 1945.

What we are seeing is nothing new. It is simply class struggle as practiced by the employer class. This strategy has been largely successful in shifting the burden of taxation from the wealthiest members of society onto the poorest. The efforts of the private sector have been aided and abetted by professional politicians and their media allies in demonizing those same sectors with the most to lose from these changes:

"Downsized" from well paying jobs, E.I. and welfare recipients are now stigmatized as "parasites" and "scroungers." Meanwhile those fortunate enough to hold onto their jobs, in addition to finding their workload dramatically increased without pay, find themselves labeled as "special interests": Teachers, healthcare workers, trade unionists, students and so forth. Only those

who sit and take their medicine without complaint are worthy of being designated "taxpayers" by the powers that be.

As the number of the poor rises so does the number of the wealthy. In 1996 250 Canadians earning more than \$250,000 paid no income tax. All through perfectly legal loopholes. At the top of the scale sits the former chairperson of Magma International Frank Stronach. Stronach's 1996 earnings reached a staggering \$20.6 million! 677 years pay for the average Canadian worker.

In 1993 Canadians voted in massive numbers for a party that promised to defend social programmes and to concentrate on creating employment, not to mention scrapping the hated G.S.T. In a very short time Canadians discovered that they had elected a government very much in line with the despised Mulroney regime to whom they had just shown the door. In fact Prime Minister Chretien mused after the election, he saw his job as selling the politics of deficit to Canadians rather than carrying out the ones the Liberals campaigned for.

The spectrum of available choices in the coming election is not broad: From the free market zealots of the Reform Party to the timid social democrats of the New Democratic Party. Despite their recent convention with its promises of standing up for the little guy, voters should remember that the NDP has yet to make a definitive assessment of Bob Rae's disastrous embrace of fiscal conservatism. Moreover, even the NDP's most successful Premier, Saskatchewan's Roy Romanow echoes the bankers by advising "Modern social

democracy means doing what you can with the funds available.”

There is a tremendous polarization in Canadian society. The enormous mobilization against the Harris government in Toronto last October and the magnificent resistance and public support of the Safeway strike are examples of the potential for a fight back. During the depression workers created new tactics to deal with new conditions. The sit-down strike and factory occupation being only the most memorable. During the coming period we will likely see new tactics for a new movement. A movement that will create and re-create itself in the course of the struggles that are to come.

May 1997

### **The Origin of May Day**

*The following article is taken from the Industrial Workers of the World web page (<http://iww.org/~iww/>) and was written by FW Gaylord. It has been slightly edited for publication here.*

May 1st, International Workers' Day, commemorates the historic struggle of people throughout the world, and is recognized in every country except the United States, Canada, and South Africa, despite the fact the holiday began in the 1880s in the United States, with the fight for the eight-hour work day.

In 1884, the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions passed a resolution stating that eight hours would constitute a legal day's work after May 1 1886. The resolution called for a general strike to further that goal, since legislative attempts had already failed. With being forced to work ten, twelve, and fourteen hours a day, rank-and-file support for the

eight-hour movement grew rapidly, despite the indifference and hostility of many union leaders. By April 1886, thousands of workers were involved in the May Day movement.

The heart of the movement was in Chicago, organized primarily by the International Working People's Association. Businesses and their friends were terrified by the increasingly revolutionary character of the movement and prepared accordingly. The police and militia were increased in size and received new and powerful weapons financed by local business. Chicago's Commercial Club purchased a \$2000 machine gun for the National Guard to be used against strikers.

By May 1st, the movement had won gains for many Chicago clothing cutters, and packing-house workers. But on May 3 1886, police fired at a crowd of strikers at the McCormick Reaper Works Factory, killing four and wounding many others. Anarchists called for a mass meeting the next day at Haymarket Square to protest the brutality. The meeting proceeded without incident, and by the time the last speaker was on the platform, the rainy gathering was already breaking up, with only a few hundred people remaining.

It was then that 180 cops marched into the square and ordered the crowd to disperse. As the speakers came down from the platform, a bomb was thrown at the police, killing one policeman and injuring seventy. Police responded by firing into the crowd, killing one worker and injuring many others. It was never determined who threw the bomb, but the incident was used as an excuse to attack the entire left and labour movement. Police raided the homes and offices of suspected radicals, and hundreds were jailed without charge. Anarchists in particular were harassed, and eight of Chicago's most active were charged with conspiracy to murder in the Haymarket bombing.

A kangaroo court found all eight guilty, despite a lack of evidence connecting any of them to the thrower (only one was even present at the meeting, and he was on the platform). They were duly sentenced to death. Albert Parsons, August Spies, Adolf Fischer, and George Engel were hanged on November 11 1887. Louis Lingg committed suicide in prison, The remaining three were pardoned in 1893. It is not surprising that the state, business leaders, mainstream unions, and the media would want to hide the true history of May Day.

In its efforts to erase the history and significance of May Day, the United States government declared May 1st to be "Law Day", and gave us instead Labour Day—a holiday devoid of any historical significance other than as a day to swill beer and sit in traffic jams. Rather than suppressing labour and radical movements, the events of 1886 and the execution of the Chicago anarchists actually inspired many generations of radicals. Emma Goldman, a young immigrant at the time, later pointed to the Haymarket affair as her political birth. Lucy Parsons, widow of Albert Parsons, called upon the poor to direct anger toward those responsible—the rich. Instead of disappearing, the anarchist movement only grew in the wake of Haymarket, spawning other movements and organizations, including the Industrial Workers of the World. Covering up the history of May Day, the state, business, mainstream unions and the media have covered up an entire legacy of dissent on this continent. As workers, we must recognize and commemorate May Day not only for its historical significance, but also as a time to organize around issues of vital importance to our class today. IWW songwriter Joe Hill wrote in one of his most powerful songs:

Workers of the world, awaken!  
Rise in all your splendid might  
Take the wealth that you are making

It belongs to you by right.  
No one will for bread be crying  
We'll have freedom, love and health,  
When the grand red flag is flying  
In the Workers' Commonwealth

### As We Don't See It

*The following article contains excerpts from a document first published in 1967 by the British libertarian socialist organization Solidarity.*

Throughout the world the vast majority of people have no control whatsoever over the decisions that most deeply and directly affect their lives. They sell their labour power while others who own or control the means of production accumulate wealth, make the laws and use the whole machinery of the State to perpetrate and reinforce their privileged positions.

...

The trade unions and the traditional parties of the left started in business to change all this. But they have come to terms with the existing patterns of exploitation. In fact they are now essential if exploiting society is to continue working smoothly. The unions act as middlemen in the labour market. The political parties use the struggles and aspirations of the working class for their own ends... We don't call however for the proclamation of new unions, which in the conditions of today would suffer a similar fate to the old ones... Our aims are simply that the workers themselves should decide on the objectives of their struggles and that the control and organization of these struggles should remain firmly in their own *hands*. The *forms* which this self-activity of the working class may take will vary considerably from country to country and from industry to industry. Its basic *content* will not.

Socialism is not just the common

ownership of the means of production and distribution. It means equality, real freedom, reciprocal recognition and a radical transformation in all human relations. It is "man's positive self-consciousness." It is man's understanding of his environment and of himself, his domination over his work and over such social institutions as he may need to create. These are not secondary aspects, which will automatically follow the expropriation of the old ruling class. On the contrary they are essential parts of the whole process of social transformation, for without them no genuine social transformation will have taken place.

A socialist society can therefore only be built from below. Decisions concerning production and work will be taken by workers' councils composed of elected and revocable delegates. Decisions in other areas will be taken on the basis of the widest possible discussion and consultation among the people as a whole. This democratization of society down to its very roots is what we mean by "workers' power."

*Meaningful action*, for revolutionaries, is whatever increases the confidence, the autonomy, the initiative, the participation, the solidarity, the equalitarian tendencies and the self-activity of the masses and whatever assists in their demystification. *Sterile and harmful action*, is whatever reinforces the passivity of the masses, their apathy, their cynicism, their differentiation through hierarchy, their alienation, their reliance on others to do things for them and the degree to which they can therefore be manipulated by others - even those allegedly acting on their behalf.

...The building of socialism will require mass understanding and mass participation. By their rigid hierarchical structure, by their ideas and by their activities, both social-democratic and bolshevik types of organizations discourage this kind of understanding and prevent this

kind of participation. The idea of that socialism can somehow be achieved by an elite party (however "revolutionary") acting "on behalf of" the working class is both absurd and reactionary.

... The task of the revolutionary organization is to help give proletarian consciousness an explicitly socialist content, to give practical assistance to workers in struggle, and to help those in different areas to exchange experiences and link up with one another.

We do not see ourselves as yet another leadership, but merely as an instrument of working class action. The function of SOLIDARITY is to help all those who are in conflict with the present authoritarian social structure, both in industry and in society at large, to generalize their experience, to make a total critique of their condition and of its causes, and to develop the mass revolutionary consciousness necessary if society is to be totally transformed.

#### **By Way of Explanation**

**Red & Black Notes** aims to produce and circulate material that rejects capitalism in favour of a libertarian socialist society. Signed articles do not necessarily represent the views of **Red & Black Notes**. If you liked the material contained in this issue, and would like to see further issues appear please get in touch. We can be reached via e-mail at [nfettes@freenet.calgary.ab.ca](mailto:nfettes@freenet.calgary.ab.ca) or by phone at (403) 263-2963

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