



why celebrate
may day?

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This booklet gives a brief history of May Day cele-
brations, looking at the ancient European festival to
welcome summer, and at a century of international
worker's day. It hasn't been easy, given our re-
sources, to cover everything, and in particular there
is very little material on Nottingham's labour May Day.
Perhaps next year...

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MAY DAY 88 GROUP. NOTTINGHAM. 1988

May Day 88, c/o NCAC, 39 Gregory Boulevard, Hyson
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bringing in the may

"May Day was celebrated with a gaiety and a poetical grace far beyond all other festivals. It had come down from the pagan times with all its Arcadian beauty, and seemed to belong to those seasons more than any Christian occasion. It is one that the poets have all combined to lavish their most delicious strains upon. The time of year was itself so inspiring, with all its newness of feeling, its buds and blossoms and smiling skies. It seemed just the chosen period for heaven and earth and youth to mingle their gladness together. There is no festivity that is so totally gone!"

William Howitt wrote this in 1840 in his Rural Life of England and would undoubtedly be amazed if he knew of the continuing history and significance of May Day. It is a day which has always provoked controversy over its meaning and the value of its celebration, a day defended, denounced and distorted until it now appears as only an echo of the popular celebration it once was.

It has been claimed as a festival originating in the worship of the Roman flower goddess Flora, or to have developed from the legend of Kybele and her lover Attis, whose spirit entered a pine tree after his death and was then symbolically resurrected every spring. These festivals took place earlier in the year however, and the May Day celebrations in the countries occupied by the Roman empire existed long before the Roman Conquest.

Particularly in a society influenced by Freud, there is now a tendency to see May Day as a certain kind of fertility festival with the maypole as the ultimate phallic symbol. But May Day had its origins in cultures based on goddess worship and where the male role in conception was not necessarily known. Part of the British (and European) celebration of May Day into the nineteenth century included the bringing back of large boughs of trees from the countryside into the villages and towns, and often attaching them to a crude post. This was a continuation of the worship of living trees. In 20th century Switzerland, small trees were still brought back and put up, a few 19th century English villages like Lanreath had living trees as their maypoles, and the complex and weighty decorations of flower garlands on early maypoles make it clear that the bleak telegraph pole style is the product of very recent cultures. The living tree was a central symbol

in goddess worship. In "Greek myths", Robert Graves points out that hawthorn-blossom - the tree popularly referred to as 'May' and most gathered on may morning- was associated with 'miraculous conception' and that the children of Hera's forced marriage to Zeus were actually the result of touching may blossom.

Patriarchal mythology frequently reverses the roles and meanings of the earlier goddess centred worship. The tree also became known as 'Jack in the Green', a common figure in British May Days as a man in a whicker construction covered in greenery. May Day eve was a time associated with witches throughout Europe. In Czechoslovakia the lighting of bonfires was seen as the 'burning of the witches' and into the last century in Britain, branches of hawthorn or 'witchwood' (mountain ash/rowan) were placed on doors as protection against evil spirits. The mountain ash was another tree sacred to goddess cults; and witches - with their independence, powers of healing and their association with other religions/magic - are now the crude remnants of earlier woman centred religions and societies. May Day eve fires (the Beltane fires) were particular long lasting traditions in the parts of Britain that stayed closest to Celtic culture with its strong matriarchal links. The roots of May Day lie deeply hidden within patriarchal mythology, but they have maintained a vigour through Greek/Roman culture and were barely affected by Christianity.

As Howitt implied, May Day was a day of celebration only rivalled in later centuries by Christmas in its importance. British written records of it begin in the 13th century, and Chaucer wrote:

Fourth goth al the court, both most and lest
To fetch the flouris fresh, and braunch, and
blome

("Court of Love")

Our image of it (as a quaint, pastoral celebration) tends to imply a day celebrated only by isolated rustic peasants, but in 1511 and 1515 Henry VIII is reported to have ridden out a-maying to be entertained by 'Robin Hood' and his two hundred archers. In 'Morte d'Arthur', Malory has Queen Guinevere instruct the Knights of the Round Table to be up early, well horsed and each accompanied by a lady, a squire and yeomen.

"At Nottingham the ceremonial 'bringing in of May', that is the carrying back in procession from woodland or open country a branch of flowering hawthorn to be set up in the market place, was always performed in the presence and under the command of the mayor"

(Sir George Sitwell "The Hurts of Haldworth")

Nottingham borough clearly supported and joined in the sixteenth century May Day celebrations. The borough records of 1541 show "Item payd for wyne on mey Day when we rode mey" and "item gyven to Master Thomas Schevyngron when he and other young men brought in mey off mey day with Master meyre". By 1569 the celebrations seemed more complex, payments were made "to the weytes for playenge so Saynt Anne Well" "a reward gevyn into Damsers that brought in mey" and also, perhaps more spectacularly "to the guners and for powder." This seems to have been the standard format for civic May Day in Nottingham in the following years - the major and aldermen bringing the mayblossom, gunners firing to welcome the dawn, along with dancers, plays and (1583) "Stapleford men that came with a maye game".

Writing in 1853 L L Jewitt said "May Day customs are similar to those of other counties, but Notts has the honour of being the parent of most of the happy sports which characterise this joyous period of the year, from the fact that most of the may games had their origin in the world famous Robin Hood". The late sixteenth century seems to be the period when a number of May Day themes came together, with Morris dancers taking part alongside members of the troupe representing Robin Hood, Maid Marion, Friar Tuck, the Fool, and also with the writing and performing of specific Robin Hood plays. Robin Hood was already well established in popular legend and began to take the place of the original May Day 'Green Man', while Maid Marion is the (rather tame) bridge between the ancient goddess and the nineteenth /twentieth century may queen.

The plays included "A pastoral pleasant comedie of Robin Hood and Little John" and "a mery geste of Robyn Hood and of hys life, wyth a new playe for to be played in maye games very pleasante and full of pastyme" (1594). The plays were popular and often rebellious, and formed part of a sequence of 'maye games' which continued into June.



Mountain Ash *Sorbus aucuparia*

This same period of obvious popularity also saw the beginnings of attacks on May Day with the rise of Puritanism. The twentieth century ritual of May Day-formalised dancing with ribbons around a bleak maypole usually performed by children, and the choosing of a young May Queen - was a format introduced in Victorian England. The original dance around the maypole was something much more impassioned:

Come lasses and lads, take leave of your dads
And away to the maypole hie,
For every he has got him a she
And the minstrels standing by.
For Willie has gotten his Jill
and Johnny has gotten his Joan
To jig it, jig it, jig it, jig it, jig it up and
down.

The sexual license was exaggerated in the minds of those who opposed the day. In his 1582 tract "A dialogue agaynst light, lewde, and lascivious dancing" Featherston claimed that young men "doe use commonly to runne into woodes in the night time, amongst maidens, to set bowes, in so much, as I have hearde of tenne maidens which went to set may, and nine of them came home with childe." (A remarkable record which perhaps only the parthenogenic powers of hawthorn could account for!). Even a century later another writer spoke of "Voluptuous youths... that run after wakes, and May Games, and Dancings, and Revellings, and are carried by the Love of Sports and pleasure, from the Love of God, and love of their salvation, and the love of Holiness, and the Love of their Callings, and into idleness, riotousness and disobedience to their superiors." May Day was a very clear affront to the puritan ethic, it obviously had nothing to do with Christianity, saw the loss of a day's work, and (supposedly) much sexual indulgence.

The records of the Archdeacons court in Nottingham demonstrate an initial battle to prevent May Day celebrations on Sundays. In 1585 Robert Dewyck of Boughton was cited because "he set up a maypole in the churchyard", and two years later John Cartlyge of Bulwell was ordered to pay 12d into the poor box "for maynteynyng pyping and daunsynge in service tyme." A similar fine was imposed on Peter Rosse in 1605 who admitted being at the may game during service time, while



Hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna*

in 1608 35 Nottingham men were cited for "prophaning the sabbath by their being at the footbale in tyme of divine service." The players seem to have escaped but eleven admitted that "their were in the meadows lookings upon the footbale players upon maye daye".

May Day became part of the political tensions leading up to the English Civil War. In 1633 what became known as 'The Book of Sports' was issued under Charles I which protected the celebrations

"... for his (Charles') good peoples lawful recreation, after the end of divine service, his good people be not disturbed, letted, or discouraged from any lawful variations such as dancing, men or women; archery for men, leaping, vaulting or any such harmless recreations; nor from having of may games, whitsun ales, and morris dancers, and the setting up of maypoles etc."

Whilst this was shrewd populist politics, its definition "after the end of divine service" shows the attempt to regulate the day and the sabbath within particular limits. To the Puritans, it legitimised the unacceptable, believing that the "prophanation of the Lord's Day by maypoles is a heathenish vanity". In 1544, Parliament ordered "all and singular maypoles that are, or shall be, erected shall be taken down and removed by the constables and churchwardens of the parishes and places where the same be; and that no maypole shall hereafter be set up, erected, or suffered within this kingdom".

It was unlikely, of course, that such a popular celebration could be abolished overnight, and similar orders in following years showed that there was resistance, even amongst the clergy. Following the Restoration of Charles II, the celebrations were again legitimised, and 1661 saw the setting up of a massive pole in the Strand, London. This period also saw the beginnings of Oak Apple Day on the May 29th (the date of Charles II's entry to London in 1660) and in some areas this replaced May 1st as the day to decorate the maypole.

The Puritans' abolition, and the introduction of Oak Apple Day, certainly affected the marking of May 1st, but perhaps a greater effect came with the changing of the calendar in 1752. 'May 1st' was moved back nearly



Cowslip *Primula veris*

two weeks in the seasonal cycle, and this period was crucial to the blossoming of may/hawthorn, and other blooming flowers and trees. The sixteenth century Nottingham aldermen would be much more likely to find may blossom on the First than we are today.

The May Day celebration patterns into the nineteenth century followed that described by Bourne in 1725:

"the juvenile part of both sexes, are wont to rise a little after midnight, and walk to some neighbouring wood, accompany'd with musick and the blowing of horns; where they break down branches from the Trees, and adorn them with Nose-gays and crowns of flowers. When this is done, they return with their Booty homewards, about the rising of the sun, and make their Doors and Windows to triumph in the Flowery Spoil. The after-part of the Day, is chiefly spent in dancing around a Tall-poll, which is called a may-poll."

As we've seen, in northern and western areas, May Day eve would have been marked by Beltane bonfires, while throughout Britain the Morris dance tradition remained strong. Flowers gathered in the night were made into garlands, perhaps of three decorated hoops on a pole or in a sphere, using wallflowers, bluebells, cowslips, ladysmocks, marsh marigolds, cuckoo flowers, daisies, sweet briar, narcissi, and of course may blossom. Trees included hawthorn, birch, beech, rowan and sycamore. A later tradition involved groups of children taking their garlands (perhaps with a doll to represent the may queen) around houses, with a rhyme, such as

Good morning, missus and master
 I wish you a happy day
 Please to smell my garland
 Because it's the first of may

and asking for money-
 to be used in an afternoon feast. There doesn't appear to have been any specific may day foods, although cream and cakes were standard to the farmhouse parties.

There was a strong connection with the dairy, with the old may day being the time to let cattle into summer pastures. The 'milkmaids dance' was another common feature - silver and pewter were borrowed from customers and carried round with the milkmaids who danced

at farms they called on. Some milkmaids later came into large cities on may day and a specifically urban tradition developed around chimney sweeps' parades, which were accompanied by Jack in the Green. In Padstow and Minehead, there are still rituals around the Hobby Horse (a man in a circular decorated frame with horse's head) and in Northern counties horses were specially decorated in ribbons. Oxford still sees a choir singing to welcome dawn at the top of Magdalene College tower. Originally a requiem for Henry VII, this event now sees thousands in the city High Street on May morning.

Dew gathered on may morning was believed to be good for the complexion

The fair maid who, the first of May
Goes to the fields at break of day
And washes in dew from the hawthorn tree,
Will ever after handsome be

as well as having healing powers. There were also customs to find out when and to whom you might later marry (although the day itself was considered unlucky for weddings). In many areas there were fairs - hence London's Mayfair.

In addition to its overall challenge to the Christian church, May Day had a number of strands of popular revolt - if only in the role of the mock Lords of the dances. In many areas May Day eve was 'mischief night', when it was socially acceptable to take farmers' gates off their hinges, destroy fences, throw bricks down chimneys, steal household items left out of doors and generally play practical jokes. In Cornwall the day was known as 'dippy day'; this could take the form of throwing water at anyone not wearing blossom, while in some parts anyone found working on May Day would be drenched or ducked. Latimer complained in the 1530s that he found the doors of a church locked and was prevented from preaching because "this is a busy day with us, we cannot hear you. It is Robin Hoods day." The gathering of greenery particularly took place on the estates of the wealthy, and was a popular mass trespass.

May Day in Nottinghamshire followed the general pattern of the rest of the country. In time the mayor no longer rode out to fetch the may blossom, but paid for it to be brought in. There are records of a particular Nottingham may pole which stood at the corner of

Clumber St and Parliament St, the gift of Sir Charles Sedley who was elected MP for the city in 1747. It stood until considered unsafe in 1780, although other permanent poles seemed to have remained into the mid nineteenth century in Hucknall, Linby and Farnsfield. The may pole at Wellow has remained, with 1976 seeing the first steel one, but the celebrations around it take place on the late May bank holiday.

A more particular remnant of May Day in Nottingham was Cowslip Sunday, when thousands left the city at dawn to go to Lambley and collect cowslips on the first Sunday after May Day. This remained popular into the early twentieth century, with a 1904 description:

"And commencing not later than 4 am, the lashing of straining brakehorses, pulling densely packed loads of holiday humanity, the braying of a never ending series of bugle-horns, the beat of many iron hoofs rattling over the granite roads, and the hearty chaff and laughter born of habitually thirsty throats made up a sabbath bedlam that, surely, would be tolerated in the streets of no other great English city!"

In 1907 a new tradition was started in Clifton village - May Day very much in the style of the Victorians: children, a may queen with attendants and ribbon dancing around the pole. This new pole lasted until 1952 and the Clifton ceremony remained remarkably strong

"Miss Reckless made an admirable and dignified queen, the maypole and country dances of the scholars, in addition to their singing, being also a credit to Miss Pepper, the head mistress. The performers were afterwards entertained to tea." (Weekly Guardian 1921)

We are obviously, a long way from the revels of the sixteenth century. 1924 in the city saw a number of schools having May dances - Bosworth Road Infants had six May queens! - in Netherfield there was an (indoor) celebration with the Notts Eastern District of the Band of Hope Union, and at the Co-op Hall the operetta "May Day in Hawthornglen". By this time, May Day had taken on new meanings as an international workers' holiday, and the 'children's' May Day was, in part, designed as an alternative to this radicalism.

Like so many other traditional customs based on the rural experience old May Day could not survive the urbanisation of Britain. While working people may have given the day a new relevance, the ancient welcome to summer comes back to haunt us. It becomes clearer that our experience in an urban environment is a minority one in human society, and that the assumptions of industrial 'progress' no longer hold true. May Day was part of the calendar ritual to celebrate the continuing cycle of natural growth and seasonal change - something which we can no longer take for granted as we understand it more and appreciate the damage we have done to the ecological balance. Now, more than ever, we need to celebrate and appreciate the natural changes upon which our future hopes will always depend.

Come, let us go while we are in our prime,
And take the harmless folly of the time;
We shall grow old apace, and die
Before we know our liberty:
Our life is short, and our days run
As fast away as does the sun.

Then, while time serves, and we are but decaying,
Come, my Corrina, come, let's go a-maying!
(Heprick 1648)



a new tradition

As the international workers' holiday, the origins of May Day are more precisely defined: "Resolved... that eight hours shall constitute a legal day's labour from and after May 1st 1886." This grand resolution was passed by the Federation of Organised Trades and Labour Unions of the United States and Canada in 1884 in an attempt to win one of the most important demands of the working class movement. The Eight Hour Day had become a rallying point throughout the industrial world for masses of people working long and inhumane hours in all trades. The USA had seen legislation brought in during the 1860s to make eight hours the legal maximum, but the law was ignored by employers and eaten away by legal loopholes.

The resolution did not initially specify the tactics to achieve the eight hour day, but the view that only mass strike action could succeed quickly became the dominant one and a major campaign was started

Arise ye toilers of America! Lay down your tools on May 1, 1886, cease your labor, close the factories, mills and mines - for one day in the year. One day of revolt - not of rest! A day not ordained by the bragging spokesmen of institutions holding the world of labor in bondage. A day on which labor makes its own laws and has the power to execute them! All without the consent or approval of those who oppress and rule. A day on which in tremendous force the unity of the army of toilers is arrayed against the powers that today hold sway over the destinies of the people of all nations. A day of protest against oppression and tyranny, against ignorance and war of any kind. A day on which to begin to enjoy "eight hours for work, eight hours for rest, eight hours for what we will".

This circular clearly sets out the radical view of May Day which still continues - that the day is one of

revolt for self determination, is international, and is not something to be politely approved by governing bodies (at this time in the USA the 'Labor Day' holiday was already being legalised in early September).

Chicago was the main campaigning centre for the eight hour day and the anarchist movement was central to its strength. Radical politics at this time had a very different make up to our own (including in Britain). Marxist parties were less clearly defined and there were none comparable to the present day British Labour Party or European socialists (ie. with electoral or governmental power). The anarchists - or Social Revolutionaries - were very much part of grass roots labour organisation.

The May Day strike in 1886 was an impressive success, with some 400,000 workers taking strike action. In Chicago, 45,000 had won shorter working days purely by the threat of strike and most of the city was paralyzed. On May 3rd a rally was held close to the McCormick Harvester plant where a strike had long been in progress, and as the rally confronted strike breakers leaving the factory police fired into the crowd, killing one person immediately and wounding many others. In response to this violence, August Spies (an anarchist member of the Central Labour Union who had been speaking at the rally) initiated the call for a protest meeting in Haymarket Square the following evening, May 4th.

Haymarket was chosen for its size, but the response was disappointing - little over a thousand people. As the evening wore on and with a storm threatening, numbers fell to little more than two hundred and the city mayor concluded that nothing was likely to occur. Then a police column of 180 approached the crowd and ordered it to disperse. As the final speaker protested that the meeting was peaceful, a bomb was thrown - killing one policeman immediately and wounding many others. The police began firing into the panicking spectators, killing at least one and fatally wounding some of their own members.

A wave of arrests, illegal raids and searches began, with hundreds of strike activists being held, and in the climate of terror the whole Eight Hour strike movement soon collapsed. Eventually eight men were put on trial for the policemen's murder - Albert R Parsons, August Spies, Samuel J Fielden, Michael Schwab, Adolph

Fisher, George Engel, Louis Lingg and Oscar Neebe. All of the eight were active in the anarchist movement, most were members of the International Working Peoples Association, and most were German born (Fielden was originally from Lancashire).

At no point was any evidence given that any of the eight had actually thrown the bomb. Only Parsons, Spies and Fielden had been at the Haymarket meeting and at the time of the explosion Parsons had already left and Spies and Fielden were leaving the speaker's platform. The trial concentrated instead on the views of the men as Social Revolutionaries, with the Judge stating it wasn't necessary for the bomb thrower to be identified or even that 'they' acted under the influence of the accused, merely that "these several defendants have advocated the use of deadly missiles against the police on occasions which they anticipated might arise in the future." The State Attorney Grinnell was even clearer:

"Law is on trial. Anarchy is on trial. These men have been selected, picked out by the grand jury and indicted because they were leaders. They are no more guilty than the thousands that follow them. Gentlemen of the jury; convict these men, make examples of them, hang them and you will save our institutions, our society."

In August 1886 all eight were found guilty; Neebe sentenced to fifteen years in prison and the other seven to death. A campaign began for clemency after appeals were refused, and it gained wide international support. (In Britain, William Morris and George Bernard Shaw campaigned and in Nottingham the Social Democratic Federation organised meetings of protest.) Eventually Fielden and Schwab were given life sentences; of the other five, Lingg committed suicide in prison the day before the execution, and on 11 November 1887 Parsons, Spies, Engel and Fischer were hanged.

In 1893 the new Governor of Illinois pardoned the survivors - as being innocent men, victims of hysteria, packed juries and a biased judge. He attacked Judge Gary's statement that the bomb thrower did not have to be identified saying that "in all the centuries during which government has been maintained among men, and crime has been punished, no judge in a civilised country has ever laid down such a rule".

His pardon, of course, came too late for the five who

the Haymarket Defendants: Albert Parsons - August Spies - George Engel - Samuel Fielden - Louis Lingg - Adolph Fischer - Oscar Neebe - Michael Schwab



died. But in his speech to the court after receiving his death sentence Spies showed his confidence in the future:

If you think that by hanging us you can stamp out the labor movement... the movement from which the downtrodden millions, the millions who toil in want and misery expect salvation - if this is your opinion, then hang us! Here you will tread upon a spark, but there and there, behind you- and in front of you, and everywhere, flames blaze up. It is a subterranean fire. You cannot put it out."

It took two years for the American labour movement to regroup after Haymarket, but at the end of 1888 the American Federation of Labor again took up the eight hour campaign and set May 1st 1890 as the day to enforce it. The American experience also influenced Europe. July 1889 saw the founding of the socialist Second International in Paris with delegates from across Europe, and the USA, passing the historic resolution:

A great international demonstration shall be organised for a fixed date in a such a manner that workers in all countries and in all cities shall on a specified day simultaneously address to the public authorities a demand to fix the workday at eight hours and to put into effect the other resolutions of the International Congress of Paris.

In view of the fact that such a demonstration has already been resolved upon by the American Federation of Labor at its convention of December 1888 in St Louis for May 1, 1890, that day is accepted as the day for the international demonstration.

The workers of the various nations shall organise the demonstration in a manner suited to conditions in their country.

The result in 1890 was the first celebration of May Day as International Worker's Day, with the Times reporting "It is certain that simultaneous demonstrations of working men did actually take place in industrial centres of most European countries. Demonstrations were held in London, Paris, Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia, Seville, Lisbon, Copenhagen, Brussels, Budapest,



THE WORKERS' MAY-POLE

[An offering for May-Day 1894 from
Walter Crane]

Berlin, Prague, Turin, Geneva, Lugarno, Warsaw, Vienna, Marseille, Reims, Amsterdam, Stockholm, Helsinki, and other cities. Outside of Europe there were demonstrations in Cuba, Peru, and Chile," and also of course in the USA, where the carpenters' union led the actual strike for an eight hour day. Across Europe, the May Day celebrations varied, as the Paris resolution had implied, according to the conditions of repression in each country. In Germany there was disagreement over whether or not there should be a call for strike action, with reprisals and sackings against those who did stop work, and the Austrian capital Vienna was at standstill and full of troops.

In Britain there were immediate signs of the long dispute over when May Day should actually be celebrated. Although agreeing with Tom Mann's proposal to join the international action, the London Trades Council did so on condition that the demonstration was held on the first Sunday after May 1 (and that they were not committed to the eight hour day!). So the main May Day celebration in Britain in 1890 took place on May 4. Given this, it was a massive success, being organised by Will Thorne and a committee representing 94 bodies, and with a rally in Hyde Park of more than 350,000 people. From one of fifteen platforms, trade unionist John Burns explained the importance of the eight hour day

"as a palliative of the overwork, misery and degradation caused by the serious condition of the working people throughout Great Britain, and also as a means of giving work to thousands who were out of work, by reducing the excessive working-hours of those who were working. While thousands were out of work, there were hundreds of thousands of men in London who were prematurely ageing themselves against their will by working overtime."

(There were no major celebrations in Nottingham that year. Although the Nottingham Trades Council was founded in 1890, it was a period when many of the local labour leaders were connected with the Liberal Party. At the same time however, Nottinghamshire miners were themselves campaigning for an eight hour working day.)

The resolutions and campaigns for the 1890 May Day demonstration had seen it essentially as a one-off affair, but its obvious success as a rallying point for working class people led to its continuance. Its



LABOUR'S MAY DAY

DEDICATED TO THE WORKERS OF THE WORLD

establishment has seen years of painful struggle - still not completed - particularly when demonstrations, strikes, trade unions or political parties have been banned, and where support for May Day could bring sackings, arrest, or death. In Europe (particularly in Germany, France, Poland and Spain) the first May Days were marked by fear and hostility on the part of employers and the state, with the New York Times describing Europe in 1891 as having "Governments Trembling as May 1 Approaches". In Britain the situation was more relaxed, and when May 1 fell on a Sunday for the first time in 1892, the Times claimed the Hyde Park crowd was "beyond all attempts at calculation".

In 1894, Nottingham held its first major May Day celebration, with thousands of people marching in strict Trades Union parades to the Forest. Here there were speakers on three platforms from the Trades Council and major unions like the miners, hosiery, and railway workers, along with members of political groups such as the Social Democratic Federation and the new Independent Labour Party. Speeches focused on the eight hour day and current parliamentary issues, and resolutions were passed by an enthusiastic crowd.

Many radicals were concerned that May Day was losing its original character, with the British trades unions and German Social Democrats particularly being criticised for celebrating on the first Sunday in May. The Second International in 1893 came up with something of a compromise resolution "To the extent that conditions in the various countries will make May Day demonstrations possible, such demonstrations should take the form of a work stoppage by all workers on May 1," as well as stating that the demonstration should be seen as part of working class determination to destroy class distinctions, this being the only guarantee of international peace.

In Britain the Social Democratic Federation did insist in 1894 on the First of May for its rally in Hyde Park, and on the same day a year later, after speeched by Tom Mann, William Morris and Eleanor Marx, adopted the resolution "That the workers demonstrating and making holiday upon the 1st of May pledge themselves to do their utmost every year to make Labour Day more and more a complete holiday, not granted by the antagonistic master-class, but wrung from them, send fraternal greetings to their fellow-soldiers, the workers of all

MAY DAY 1938



SOUVENIR PROGRAMME

countries." And a year later Morris wrote in Justice, the SDF paper: "Certainly May Day is above all days of the year fitting for the protest of the disinherited against the system of robbery that shuts the door betwixt then and a decent life. The day when the promise of the year reproaches the waste inseperable from the society of inequality..." (It's worth remembering again that this was the period when the 'traditional' May Day celebrations became focused on the maypole, dancing with ribbons, and the child May queen).

The eight hour day continued as a central May Day demand, but to it were added others: universal suffrage, against war, and for the right to organise. In 1905 Russian workers in St Petersburg were attacked by cavalry when they tried to protest to the Czar about famine. Hundreds were killed, and the same day in Warsaw saw troops firing into a May Day crowd. In the USA, the mood changed amongst the mainstream union movement, and the American Federation of Labour abandoned its strike policy; but from its foundation in 1905, the Industrial Workers of the World (the 'Wobblies') continued the radical May Day, in contrast to the new legalised Labor Day.

The coming of the First World War brought an end to much of the international solidarity amongst European trade unionists and socialists, and an end to May Day demonstrations. There were courageous exceptions. In 1916, Karl Liebknecht spoke at a rally in Berlin, after issuing a leaflet stating that "on the first of May, we reach out a brotherly hand to the people in France, in Belgium, in Russia, in England, in the entire world." He was arrested and imprisoned for treason, but there were protests in other German cities and in 1917 strikes on the Rhine.

The success of the Russian revolution increased the tension around May Day after the war. In 1919, the USA May Day marches were attacked by police, troops and vigilantes; in Paris meetings were banned and hundreds of workers were killed in Germany (Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg were murdered soon after). Britain experienced mass strike action, (particularly in Coventry and amongst Scottish miners) as did Ireland, and the militancy continued in 1926, on the eve of the General Strike.

In Nottingham that year, several thousand people

IK WERK VOOR CHILI



1 MEI AKTIE

EVERT VERMEER STICHTING
PVDA - AFDELINGEN
CHILI - KOMMITEE
WERELDWINKELS - SJALOOM
WERKTEATER - NIVON

assembled on the Forest, with Alderman Herbert Bowles, leader of the local Labour Party, announcing that the Labour movement were behind the miners, and other speakers stating that the conflict represented the breakdown of modern capitalism with the whole of the trades union movement against the Government. At the Independent Labour Party rally and dance that evening news of the strike finally came through, and in the words of one of those there, the whole hall "went absolutely mad... they formed chains singing the 'Internationale' and the 'Red Flag' as they marched round and round."

Through the 1930s anti-fascism was a major theme at May Day rallies around the world with protests against Hitler, Mussolini and the war build up, and in support of Republican Spain (the British May Day in 1938 was a popular 'Spain Day'). In 1933, after the Nazis had taken power in Germany, the Minister of Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, issued a May Day Manifesto announcing that May 1st would be "the festival day of national labour" when "Germans of all classes" would march together. In London the Times praised this move to end "the glorification of class-warfare and make May Day an occasion for the abolition of class differences and for the unification of workers and employers in the Fascist model." There were, however, illegal radical May Day demonstrations throughout Germany. The next day all free trade unions were outlawed and their assets seized.

In the Second World War, May Day was largely abandoned, with socialist and trade union organisations urging workers to stay at work and produce the weapons needed to destroy fascism. The New York United May Day Committee in 1942 stated "These May Day assembly lines humming with production are the lines of the march to victory and freedom." There were May Day demonstrations through the war in Fascist occupied countries, such as France and Bulgaria; and in 1944, Communist inmates of Buchenwald concentration camp held a secret meeting of German, Russian, Czech, Dutch, French, Belgian and Polish prisoners, and produced a hand written May Day leaflet.

The end of the war produced massive May Day celebrations, some countries like Austria and Japan celebrating legally for the first time in over a decade, and marches in the USA seeing uniformed Army officers taking part. The tide quickly turned with the outset



of the Cold War, and marches in America were banned at a time when virtually all radical or dissident activity was seen as being organised by puppets of the Soviet Union. The London march was also banned in 1949, with the London Trades Council holding a substitute meeting in Trafalgar Square. It wasn't until the 1960s that May Day re-emerged in the West as a major day of action, and very often it was only the focus of anti-Vietnam war protest which brought this out.

In other parts of the world the situation was different. By the 1920s May Day had spread to become truly international, and a rallying point for people struggling to gain the basic democratic rights which had affected the first May Days in Europe. In 1950, for example, the South African government banned the planned Freedom Day, while the Youth League of the African National Congress under Nelson Mandela called for a "national stoppage of work for one day as a mark of protest against the reactionary policy of the Government." During the 1950s May Day marches were banned in Paris in an attempt to prevent Algerians in France demonstrating for Algerian independence. In Portugal, the first legal May Day for half a century followed the overthrow of the Salazar dictatorship, "Portugal has never seen a day like today, at least not for about fifty years. Hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets of Lisbon to celebrate their first legal May Day holiday and the promise of a return to democracy." (reported a more sympathetic 'Times'!)

May Day has also been very different, of course, in the Socialist countries. It was made a major day of celebration in the Soviet Union after the revolution, and the pattern continued in Eastern Europe and China in the 1940s, in Cuba and in many other countries which have had - however briefly - strong socialist governments. The results are the kind of enormous military parades seen in Moscow's Red Square: an image which all too often serves as the Western convention of what the workers May Day is all about, and which sees the day as a very definite product of 'Communist foreigners'. As we've seen, the meaning of May Day is something which many people and many governments have fought over, and it's an occasion which dissident and worker organisations still use in both protest and celebration.

In Britain, the Labour government in the 1970s made 'May Day' an annual Bank holiday - but on the first Monday of the month. Its significance is now largely

lost, and the marches and rallies organised attract nothing like the numbers or enthusiasm of ninety or fifty years ago.

The workers May Day emerged from a popular campaign to define the new working environment around the needs of people, not machines; and in recognition of the internationalism of this demand which transcended the boundaries of the old nations. The twentieth century has accelerated this process and hardened the links (economic, political, cultural) between all peoples. The potential in the day remains in the prospect that one day we will take it, internationally, for ourselves.

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