

# Black Flag

FOR ANARCHIST  
RESISTANCE

## The Spirit of May Day



**Direct Action against Capital.** That is the spirit of May Day. Born from the mass strikes for the eight hour day in America in 1886, May Day is about celebrating the efforts of working class people to change their lives by their own efforts. It is about standing up for yourself and your fellow workers and demanding liberty and justice. It is about fighting capitalism and dreaming of a better future, a better society. It is about reminding ourselves another world is possible and that we are creating it today in our struggles against oppression and exploitation.

May Day should be more than a march through the streets, listening to politicians and union officials. It should be the rallying point for a mass movement which combats low pay, long working hours, unemployment,

poverty, restrictions on liberty outside and inside work, inequality, ecological destruction and the other evils we face. We should not be scared of media attacks on such a real labour movement. The public who see them are just as bossed about, overworked and under paid producing the wealth a minority monopolises.

We are a long way from such a movement and will remain so as long as we forget the spirit of May Day. Only by expressing our economic and social power can we change things for the better. That means **direct action against capital**: strikes, boycotts, occupations, blockades, solidarity. Relying on politicians to do it for us has failed and will always fail. We have to do it ourselves, by our own efforts and organisations. That is how May Day started and that is still its message.

**Direct Action -- Solidarity -- Workers Control**

[www.anarchism.ws](http://www.anarchism.ws)

[www.anarchistfaq.org](http://www.anarchistfaq.org)

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# The Origins of May Day

**May 1st is a day of special significance for the labour movement. While it has been hijacked in the past by the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union and elsewhere, the labour movement festival of May Day is a day of world-wide solidarity. A time to remember past struggles and demonstrate our hope for a better future. A day to remember that an injury to one is an injury to all.**

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**“I say to you: ‘I despise you. I despise your order; your laws, your force-propped authority.’ HANG ME FOR IT!” Louis Lingg**

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The history of Mayday is closely linked with the anarchist movement and the struggles of working people for a better world. Its origins lie in the execution of four anarchists in Chicago in 1886 for organising workers in the fight for the eight-hour day. May Day is a product of “*anarchy in action*” — of the struggle of working people using direct action in labour unions to change the world.

It began in the 1880s in the USA. In 1884, the **Federation of Organised Trades and Labor Unions of the United States and Canada** (it changed its name in 1886 to the **American Federation of Labor**) passed a resolution which asserted that “*eight hours shall constitute a legal day’s work from and after May 1, 1886, and that we recommend to labour organisations throughout this district that they so direct their laws as to conform to this resolution.*” A call for strikes on May 1st, 1886 was made in support of this demand.

In Chicago the anarchists were the main force in the union movement, and partially as a result of their presence, the unions translated this call into strikes on May 1st. The anarchists thought that the eight hour day could only be won through direct action and solidarity. They considered that struggles for reforms, like the eight hour day, were not enough in themselves. They viewed them as only one battle in an ongoing class war that would only end by social revolution and the creation of a free society. It was with these ideas that they organised and fought.

In Chicago alone, 400 000 workers went out and the threat of strike action ensured that more than 45 000 were granted a shorter working day without striking. On May 3, 1886, police fired into a crowd of pickets at the McCormick Harvester Machine Company, killing at least one striker, seriously wounding five or six others, and injuring an undetermined number. Anarchists called for a mass meeting the next day in Haymarket Square to protest the brutality. According to the Mayor, “*nothing had occurred yet, or looked likely to occur to require*

*interference.*” However, as the meeting was breaking up a column of 180 police arrived and ordered the meeting to end. At this moment a bomb was thrown into the police ranks, who opened fire on the crowd. How many workers were wounded or killed by the police is still unknown.

A reign of terror swept over Chicago. Meeting halls, union offices, printing shops and private homes were raided (usually without warrants). Such raids into working-class areas allowed the police to round up all known anarchists and other socialists. Many suspects were beaten up and some bribed. “*Make the raids first and look up the law afterwards*” was the public statement of J. Grinnell, the States Attorney, when a question was raised about search warrants.

Eight anarchists were put on trial for accessory to murder. No pretence was made that any of the accused had carried out or even planned the bomb. Instead the jury were told “*Law is on trial. Anarchy is*

were convicted. Seven were sentenced to death, one to 15 years’ imprisonment.

An international campaign resulted in two of the death sentences being commuted to life, but the worldwide protest did not stop the US state. Of the remaining five, one (Louis Lingg) cheated the executioner and killed himself on the eve of the execution. The remaining four (Albert Parsons, August Spies, George Engel and Adolph Fischer) were hanged on November 11th 1887. They are known in Labour history as the Haymarket Martyrs. Between 150,000 and 500,000 lined the route taken by the funeral cortege and between 10,000 to 25,000 were in the graveyard itself.

In 1889, the American delegation attending the International Socialist congress in Paris proposed that May 1st be adopted as a workers’ holiday. This was to commemorate working class struggle and the “*Martyrdom of the Chicago Eight*”. Since then Mayday has become a day for international solidarity. In 1893, the new Governor of Illinois pardoned the Martyrs because of their obvious innocence, saying “*the trial was not fair*”.

The authorities had believed at the time of the trial that such persecution would break the back of the labour movement. They were wrong. In the words of August Spies when he addressed the court after he had been sentenced to die:

*“If you think that by hanging us you can*

***“The existing economic system has placed on the markets for sale man’s natural rights . . .***

***A freeman is not for sale or for hire”***

**Albert Parsons**

*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 who follow them. Gentlemen of the jury; convict these men, make examples of them, hang them and you save our institutions, our society.”* The jury was selected by a special bailiff, nominated by the State’s Attorney and was composed of businessmen and the relative of one of the cops killed. The defence was not allowed to present evidence that the special bailiff had publicly claimed “*I am managing this case and I know what I am about. These fellows are going to be hanged as certain as death.*” Not surprisingly, the accused

*stamp out the labour movement . . . the movement from which the downtrodden millions, the millions who toil in misery and want, expect salvation — if this is your opinion, then hang us! Here you will tread on 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.”*

At the time and in the years to come, this defiance of the state and capitalism was to win thousands to anarchism, particularly in the US itself. Since the Haymarket event, anarchists have celebrated May Day (on the 1st of May — the reformist unions and labour parties moved its marches to the first Sunday of the month).

We do so to show our solidarity with other working class people across the world, to celebrate past and present struggles, to show our power and remind the ruling class of their vulnerability.

Anarchists stay true to the origins of May Day and celebrate its birth in the direct action of the oppressed. Oppression and exploitation breed resistance and, for anarchists, May Day is an international symbol of that resistance and power — a power expressed in the last words of August Spies, chiselled in stone on the monument to the Haymarket martyrs in Waldheim Cemetery in Chicago:

*“The day will come when our silence will be more powerful than the voices you are throttling today.”*

To understand why the state and business class were so determined to hang the Chicago Anarchists, it is necessary to realise they were considered the “leaders” of a massive radical union movement. In 1884, the Chicago Anarchists produced the world’s first daily anarchist newspaper, the **Chicagoer Arbeiter-Zeitung**. This was written, read, owned and published by the German immigrant working class movement. The combined circulation of this daily plus a weekly (**Vorbote**) and a Sunday edition (**Fackel**) more than doubled, from 13,000 per issues in 1880 to 26,980 in 1886. Anarchist weekly papers existed for other ethnic groups as well (one English, one Bohemian and one Scandinavian). As Martyr Oscar Neebe argued, *“these are the crimes I have committed: I organised trade unions. I was for reduction of the hours of labour, and the education of the labouring man, and the re-establishment of ‘Die Arbeiter Zeitung’, the workmen’s paper.”*

Anarchists were very active in the Central Labour Union (which included the eleven largest unions in the city) and aimed to make it, in the words of Albert Parsons (one of the Martyrs), *“the embryonic group of the future ‘free society.’”* The anarchists were also part of the **International Working People’s Association** (also called the **“Black International”**) which had representatives from 26 cities at its founding convention. The I.W.P.A. soon made headway among trade unions,

especially in the mid-west and its ideas of direct action of the rank and file and of trade unions serving as the instrument of the working class for the complete destruction of capitalism and the nucleus for the formation of a new society became known as the **“Chicago Idea”** (an idea which later inspired the **Industrial Workers of the World** which was founded in Chicago in 1905).

This idea was expressed in the manifesto issued at the I.W.P.A.’s Pittsburgh Congress of 1883:



***“You may pronounce the sentence upon me, honourable judge, but let the world know that in A.D. 1886, in the State of Illinois, eight men were sentenced to death because they believed in a better future; because they had not lost their faith in the ultimate victory of liberty and justice!”*** August Spies

*“First — Destruction of the existing class rule, by all means, i.e. by energetic, relentless, revolutionary and international action.*

*“Second — Establishment of a free society based upon co-operative organisation of production.*

*“Third — Free exchange of equivalent products by and between the productive organisations without commerce and*

*profit-mongery.*

*“Fourth — Organisation of education on a secular, scientific and equal basis for both sexes.*

*“Fifth — Equal rights for all without distinction to sex or race.*

*“Sixth — Regulation of all public affairs by free contracts between autonomous (independent) communes and associations, resting on a federalistic basis.”*

In addition to their union organising, the Chicago anarchist movement also organised social societies, picnics, lectures, dances, libraries and a host of other activities. These all helped to forge a distinctly working-class revolutionary culture in the heart of the **“American Dream.”** The threat to the ruling class and their system was too great to allow it to continue (particularly with memories of the vast uprising of labour in 1877 still fresh. As in 1886, that revolt was also meet by state violence). Hence the repression, kangaroo court, and the state murder of those the state and capitalist class considered **“leaders”** of the movement.

The Chicago anarchists, like all anarchists, were applying their ideas to the class struggle. They were forming unions organised and animated with the libertarian spirit. They saw that anarchism was not a utopian dream but rather a means of action, creating not only the ideas, but also the facts of the future itself by means of direct action, solidarity and organising from the bottom up. That was why they were effective and why the state framed and murdered them.

The **“Chicago Idea”** is still relevant. We must apply our anarchist ideas to everyday life and the class struggle, inside and outside industry, in order to make anarchism a possibility. we must reclaim the anarchist spirit of May Day.

**Make everyday an International Day of solidarity and direct action!**

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***“every anarchist is a socialist but every socialist is not necessarily an anarchist . . . the communistic anarchists demand the abolition of political authority, the state . . . we advocate the communistic or co-operative methods of production.”*** Adolph Fischer

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**Black**  
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*For a social system based on mutual aid and voluntary co-operation; against state control and all forms of government and economic repression. To establish a share in the general prosperity for all – the breaking down of racial, religious, national and sex barriers – and to fight for the life of one world.*

**Black Flag**

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# Reclaiming the labour movement

It is over 120 years since the American unions proclaimed that workers should work only 8 hours a day. Today, most workers across the world still toil for longer. In Britain, many work far more than that to make ends meet. Other get themselves into debt to survive. It is a sad indictment of the labour movement that after more than a century of technological progress this is the case.

For most of those 120 years the unions have failed to live up to their potential. Born from the struggle of workers against their bosses, they have adopted tactics and structures which hinder that struggle. The unions have tied themselves to political parties rather than relying on their own strength. They are handicapped by bureaucracy and top-down decision making. They squander our only effective weapons, the direct action and solidarity which express our economic power. The labour movement needs to be reclaimed by its members before it can even attempt to change the world for the better.

To do so, we need to recognise the importance of *Direct Action* and *Solidarity*. Electioneering has been a disaster for the labour movement, watering down socialist principles and producing the likes of Blair. We must rely on our own strength rather than putting crosses on a bit of paper every four years. Only direct action (strikes, occupations, boycotts, work to rules, etc.) and solidarity can win our battles. We gain a sense of their own power and abilities — and create the possibility of a better society.

We need *industrial organisation*. How many times have we seen our strikes undermined by members of other trade unions crossing the picket line? We have one boss, we should have one union. But *one big union* is not enough if it is run from the top-down by well-paid bureaucrats. We need to organise from the bottom-up, with the *workplace assembly* the fundamental decision making body. Instead of centralising power into the hands of a few leaders, the workplace meetings will federate by means of elected, mandated, recallable delegates.

As a step in this direction we need to organise assemblies of all strikers, regardless of union, and the election of

strike committees which carry out the decisions of those assemblies — or are recalled and replaced by them. Only that will empower the rank and file and allow them to control their own struggles and organisations.

But such *workers control* is only the first step. Just as we don't need union bosses telling us when and how to fight, we don't need actual bosses telling us what to do during working hours either. We can manage our own work, making it more interesting, pleasant and safer as well as people and planet friendly. We must reject the false choice of



privatisation versus nationalisation in favour of *socialisation* and co-operative production in the interests of the community. The *abolition of wage labour* is the only way to end capitalism once and for all. Only then will we have economic liberty.

Organising in the workplace is not enough. We need neighbourhood organisations, popular assemblies in which we can address what affects our communities. Like the anti-poll-tax unions which defeated Thatcher, they would provide a powerful means of combating the state. Federated with the industrial organisations, we have the means of resisting the powerful until we can get rid of them.

By organising in this way we create the framework of a new, libertarian, socialist, society without bosses, bureaucrats and politicians. A free society of free and equal individuals sharing the world will require a revolution. But not the kind of revolution which replaces one set of bosses with another.

Libertarian ends need liberation means. We must decentralise power into the hands of all, not concentrate it into the hands of a few party leaders. Real socialism, anarchism, will be created and run from below.

Only self-management today can ensure freedom and equality after the revolution. If we want to change the world, we must start by changing the way we organise and fight today.