

May Day—1886 and Since

By SAM DARCY

HISTORY played a trick on the American Federation of Labor. It appointed Samuel Gompers as one of the officiating nursemaids at the cradle of International May Day. Events however sometimes move faster than and in different directions from their initiators. May Day is a revolutionary weapon of the workers. It is so that we can explain the eagerness of the capitalist world, from Hoover to Green and company, to deport May Day from the United States and declare it of foreign birth. Only reactionaries who would break the world unity of the workingclass could take the position that demonstrations initiated by the workers of other countries should not be participated in by the American working class. The enemies of the workers now make this reactionary appeal to the most backward nationalist instincts of the people.

Gompers himself tells at least part of the story of the origin of May Day. In his autobiography he writes as follows:

"As plans for the eight hour movement developed, we were constantly realizing how we could widen our purpose. As the time for the meeting of the International Workingmen's Congress in Paris (July 14, 1889) approached, it occurred to me that we could aid our movement by an expression of world wide sympathy from that Congress." . . .

"My letter informed the Paris Congress of our American efforts to celebrate the coming May Day by establishing eight hours for the carpenters and urged to cooperate. The proposal fell upon the ears of two bitterly warring factions. The German delegation headed by Liebknecht, Bebel and Singer, opposed the resolution on the ground that under the Imperial German Government it would be suicide for them to approve the movement. Herr Liebknecht emphatically opposed the proposal on the ground that labor organizations were not strong enough to succeed in the undertaking. Eventually a resolution for an eight hour demonstration was adopted and there was pretty general observance of the day."

But this, his own writing, must have sounded badly to the ears of the old reactionary Gompers. Following the narration of the above facts, showing clearly the initiative role of American labor, he adds the amazingly brazen remark that:

"That was the origin of European May Day which has become a regular institution in all European countries."

Gompers in his book attempts to take the credit for the origin of the May Day idea. This is of course utter nonsense. The

proposal first was made in 1884 by a local of the Knights of Labor in Baltimore. It was defeated within that organization through the efforts of the reactionary Powderly, the Grand Master Workman. The central slogan around which the May Day demonstrations were carried on, was taken from the International Workingmen's Association which in 1864 called for the limitation of the working day as "the first step in the direction of the emancipation of the workingclass."

When May Day demonstrations were first held in Europe towards the end of the decade (1880-90) the capitalist class was in a period of "prosperity." Illusions had spread among the workers concerning the possibility of class peace. The German working class was in a struggle to break the infamous Exception Law which was the instrument for illegalizing the proletarian movement in that country. Despite this, May Day strikes and demonstrations were held in Budapest, Warsaw, Hamburg, and other cities. Police attempts to suppress the movement led to bloodshed in almost every case.

In the United States May Day demonstrations were held in many of the big cities throughout the country already four years before the movement was taken up in Europe! In Chicago 40,000 men went on strike closing thereby many factories and crippling transportation. Fights took place between police and workers in the Harvester plant and other of the largest factories in the country. Workers were clubbed and shot down by the police. *In New York a huge May Day meeting was held in Union Square.* Police brutality was especially aimed at the German workers who because they were the most recent immigrants of the time suffered the worst conditions and were the most militant in the class struggle.

In the succeeding years the reformists began a movement to take the revolutionary spirit out of May Day. Even at its inception the British Trade Unions leaders, the first in the international to feel the bribe of profits from colonial possessions, evaded the issue by calling for demonstrations on the first Sunday in May! All the efforts of the reformists however never succeeded in taking this revolutionary weapon from the hands of the proletarian masses.

Among the first efforts to introduce May Day to the Russian masses is that of 1896. Lenin, then incarcerated in the Czar's dungeons for his political activity, wrote and smuggled out of prison, a May Day manifesto in the name of the League for the Struggle for the Emancipation of the Working Class which was distributed to the workers in forty factories in Petersburg in a total of 2,000 copies. For clarity, simplicity, and effect there are few leaflets to surpass this one. It has a total of about 1,000 words. It is marked

by a total absence of the hectic, complicated and excited phraseology which mark so many of our own leaflets. We reprint here the opening paragraph:

Comrades!

Let us consider our position very carefully—let us examine the conditions in which we spend our lives. What do we see? We work long and hard. We produce endless wealth, gold and apparel, satins and silks. From the depths of the earth we extract iron and coal. We build machines, we outfit ships, we construct railroads. All the wealth of the world is the product of our hands, of our sweat and blood. And what kind of wages do we get for this forced labor? If things were as they should, we would be living in fine houses, we would wear good clothes, and would never have to suffer any need. But we know well enough that our wages never suffice for our living. Our bosses push down wages, force us to work overtime, place unjust fines upon us—in a word oppress us in every way. And then when we give voice to our dissatisfaction we are thrown into prison without further ado.

In this brief simple fashion does Lenin speak to the workers in the May Day manifesto of 1896. The distribution of this leaflet helped to start a strike in the textile mills of 40,000 spinners and weavers.

May Day continued to grow in the response of the masses. The colonial countries in the East and in South America; the oppressed of Africa and Australia; in fact on every continent revolutionary May Day demonstrations became the traditional activity of the workers on May 1.

In the several years preceeding the outbreak of the World War the agitation around May Day witnessed not only the struggle of Labor against capitalism but also the battle of the revolutionary workers against the poisonous agitation of the reformists.

Against the holiday-Spring festival agitation of the reformists there was issued by the then Left elements within the old Social-Democracy a clear call to battle. Rosa Luxemburg, writing in Leipzig on April 30, 1913, pens a brilliantly prophetic May Day article. We reprint the closing section:

"At this moment of frenzied military preparations and of war orgies it is only the resolute fighting stand of the working masses, their ability and readiness for powerful mass action, which still maintains world peace, which can still postpone the threatening world idea of resolute mass action as demonstrations of international solidarity and as a fighting tactic for peace and for Socialism even in the strongest section of the International, the German working class, strikes root, the greater guaranty we shall have that from the world war, which will inevitably take place sooner or later, there will result an ultimate victorious settlement between the world of labor and that of capital."

But the war was postponed only for a year. The outbreak of the World War shattered the old Social Democracy, but May Day, the day of revolutionary struggle, became more than ever a powerful proletarian weapon.

May Day, 1915, the International Socialist Conference opened at Zimmerwald—the first organized step of the revolutionary workers against the “Socialist” betrayers. In Moscow several tens of thousands of workers went on strike. In Germany the Social-Democracy issued an appeal to the workers to abstain from any demonstrations! Karl Liebknecht was at that time being run into the non-combatant section of the army in order to keep him away from the masses. His work at the front alarmed the Kaiser’s officials so, that they sent him back to Berlin. Using this opportunity, Liebknecht organized on May Day, 1916, one of the greatest May Day demonstrations ever witnessed up to this time on the continent under the slogan, “Against the Imperialist War” then raging at its height.

In the United States, Gompers and his crew, had long since betrayed Workers’ May Day. Together with the government, Labor Day in September was substituted. To this time, however, the chief observers of Labor Day are the bankers, the manufacturers and the Labor fakers who usually celebrate this day in army camps or in millionaire hotels. To the great mass of workers it is merely a day off—that is where it is allowed. The government made a long series of attempts to take May 1 away from the workers as a day of militant struggle. When this generation was still young, May 1 was declared to be “Dewey Day” in the United States. Attempts were made to parade in commemoration of this butcher of colonial workers. But all in vain. For the past decade or thereabouts, May 1 has been declared Child Health Day. But this monstrous hypocrisy of the exploiters of four million child laborers never deceived the masses.

Except for the period of the beginning of the May Day movement, possibly the greatest May Day was the May Day of 1919. And the greatest demonstration in that year was held in Cleveland under the leadership of our Comrade Charles E. Ruthenberg with the central slogans of “Support Soviet Russia,” and “Free the Political Prisoners.” In that year May Day in the entire country witnessed bloody battles between workers and police. In Boston, following the street battle in which billies, revolvers, and other weapons were freely used more than one hundred workers were arrested and brutally beaten in jail before being sentenced.

In Cleveland the day was marked by a parade of 20,000 workers, who on reaching the Public Square, the scene of the demonstration,

were joined by 30,000 more. The leading columns had hardly entered the Square when the police and fascists with horses, machine guns, army tanks, etc., began their attacks. We leave it to Comrade Ruthenberg, the leader of the demonstration to tell the story of what took place:

"Of course the workers fought back, and fought back bravely. But they were caught at a disadvantage, with their lines extended through the heart of the city four abreast, as it no doubt had been planned that they should be caught. (The plan of the parade had been agreed upon with the police—S.A.D.) The fight continued from about two o'clock until late in the evening.

Two of the workers were shot by police officers, one being killed on the spot and the other has since died in the hospital. Hundreds were brutally beaten, men and women alike, and about one hundred and fifty arrested. The brutalities did not cease with the attack made upon the streets. The writer was arrested with the others, and worker after worker placed in the same cell block told of how the police took advantage of a dark corridor leading into the station to administer some extra blows with their clubs. One man, unable to stand up, was dragged into the corridor, set on his feet and told to stand up before the registry clerk, and when he collapsed was brutally shoved into a corner. The floor before the clerk's window was soon covered with blood from the worker's wounds and medical aid was not furnished for hours after.

While the fighting was going on a crowd of hoodlums, with the police looking on, entered the Party headquarters and tore and smashed everything they could lay their hands on."

May Day has by this time come into its own again. Every May Day sees increasing millions, led by the workers of the Soviet Union, thundering along the streets demonstrating international revolutionary solidarity. In the United States similarly each year showed the growth of the strength of the working class under the leadership of the Communist Party. In New York City, May Day 1929 witnessed the first parade of revolutionary workers since the war. About 20,000 took part.

This year scared by the tremendous demonstrations of August 1, the New York Katovis demonstration, and demonstrations on March 6 International Unemployment Day, the police are doing everything they can to take the right of workers to meet on the streets away from us. In New York City a police edict says that not a single workers' meeting will be permitted on the streets. Instead the biggest city centers, including Union Square, the scene of the first May Day demonstration in the United States in 1886, will be given over to fascists and armed police.

Will we be less worthy than our proletarian ancestors in the May Day struggle against our bosses? August 1, the events around the Katovis demonstration, and March 6 say NO! The workers

of New York and of the entire country have shown that they know how to carry on the glorious fighting tradition of the American working class. May Day, 1930, will go down in history, together with the events related above and many more not yet told, as a shining example of working class revolutionary solidarity and courageous fighting ability for our slogans:

For the political mass strike.

For 7-hour day, 5-day week.

Against imperialist war—for the defense of our workers' fatherland, the Soviet Union.

For work or wages.

For a Workers' and Farmers' Government.

