

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article1038>



May Day

Which side are you on?

- IV Online magazine - 2006 - IV378 - May 2006 -

Publication date: Monday 1 May 2006

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

FOR THE first time in six decades, International Workers Day will be celebrated on U.S. soil with mass working-class demonstrations on May 1. May Day, celebrated the world over, commemorates the seismic upheaval inside the U.S. that launched the struggle for the eight-hour workday in 1886, a time when native-born workers had few rights and immigrants had still fewer, yet both united in a class-wide battle.

The decision to organize a national day of protest for immigrant rights on May 1 this year is a conscious nod toward the traditions embodied by this working-class holiday, in which immigrants have played such a vital role historically.

[https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/May_Day12.jpg]

May 1, 2006, holds the potential to begin to revive that tradition, from America's grassroots. The movement's most powerful slogan, "a day without immigrants," is based upon a strategy of social struggle tied explicitly to the power of workers to withhold their labor-which successfully built the U.S. union movement in the first few decades of the 20th century.

For the labor movement, the lessons of this new struggle, with traditions rooted in its own history, could finally begin to reverse decades of retreat and setback.

To be sure, there is a debate over strategy underway inside the immigrant rights movement. Last week, Time magazine featured an article, "The Immigrants' Dilemma: To Boycott or Not to Boycott? A split is growing over how militant the upcoming "Day Without Immigrants" should be."

Since hundreds of thousands turned out to protest in more than 100 cities on April 10, spurring several days of student walkouts from Dallas to Los Angeles, congressional Democrats and their movement minions have done their best to rein in workplace and school walkouts on May 1.

Democrats have warned supporters that walkouts could create a "backlash," while dangling the promise of "comprehensive immigration reform"-a misleading term denoting "legalization" rather than "amnesty."

Thus far, Democratic-sponsored proposals for legalization exclude the vast majority of immigrants from the path to citizenship, instead promoting guest-worker programs that offer immigrant workers no right to workplace representation, to the delight of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

Moreover, Democrats are carefully playing to both sides in the national immigration debate, as Sen. Hillary Clinton demonstrated in a recent New York Daily News interview, in which reporters described her "embracing both conservative and liberal goals."

In the interview, Clinton argued that U.S. borders should be secured with a wall or "smart fence" before legalization begins.

In contrast to the moribund antiwar movement, however, Democrats have not successfully derailed the militant wing of the immigrant rights movement-and plans for a May 1 boycott continue in major U.S. cities. The difference has been the strength of the immigrant rights movement inside the working class and the growth of a committed left wing

Which side are you on?

willing to challenge the dominance of strategies that rely on congressional Democrats.

While the catalyst for this movement has been the Sensenbrenner Bill, HR 4437, criminalizing undocumented immigrants and anyone who assists them, the sentiment among millions of immigrants is for full rights and amnesty. And Democrats' attempts at sabotage have begun to embolden a self-conscious left wing within the movement.

New York City activists booed Clinton's proposals at an April 22 planning meeting for a human chain protest. Los Angeles-based Nativio Lopez, president of the Mexican American Political Association, argued, "So what's the ruckus about a boycott? We need to put the focus of power with the worker and immigrants, not in the hierarchies, to resolve the immigration reform debate."

The fates of both native- and foreign-born workers are inextricably tied, despite widespread claims to the contrary. As Julio Huato argued recently in *Monthly Review*, "The working and living conditions of U.S. workers don't have to be subject to a zero-sum game played by natives versus immigrants (and this includes our thin and frayed social safety net). But they will be for as long as we treat the interest of capital as immutable and sacred."

There is nothing new about the modern immigration debate except the legal terminology. Immigrants have not been welcomed in the "land of opportunity" since the first wave of Irish immigrants landed on U.S. shores in the late 1820s. No distinction existed between documented and undocumented immigrants before broad immigration controls were imposed in the 1920s. All immigrant labor was used to compete with white, native-born workers-as were disfranchised African Americans.

Corporations have traditionally used racism to encourage competition between workers, in order to drive down wages for the entire working class and weaken the labor movement. Yet all too often, union leaders have betrayed workers' interests by opposing the rights of immigrants while failing to champion the rights of African Americans.

In 1867, when 10,000 Chinese workers staged one of the most important strikes of the 19th century, they stood alone. They demanded higher pay, shorter working hours (including an eight hour-day for tunneling workers), a ban on whipping and the right of workers to quit their jobs. Yet no unions came to their defense, and within a week the strike was crushed-a setback for the entire labor movement, which would not win the right to unionize until the 1930s.

Immigrant workers have performed another service for the U.S. working class, long unacknowledged and broadly unappreciated. Since 1886, when German immigrants incorporated the politics of anarchism and Marxism into the struggle for the eight-hour day, immigrant workers have brought radical politics with them when they migrate, pressuring the U.S. labor movement from within to challenge the conservative ideology U.S. rulers seek to impose.

In 1886, anarchists from the International Working People's Association (IWPA) led the struggle for the eight-hour day, and its ground troops were overwhelmingly German immigrants. Forty thousand workers struck for the eight-hour day in Chicago, including an altercation with police on May 3 alongside strikers at McCormick Harvester Works that killed four workers and injured many more.

A rally the next day at Haymarket Square to protest the police brutality attracted just 1,200, dwindling to 300 when rain began to fall. Just as the speeches were concluding, police entered the square and ordered the rally to disperse. As the speakers were leaving, a bomb was thrown into the crowd, killing eight and injuring 67 police. In response to the bomb, police opened fire on the crowd, killing and wounding civilians and police alike.

Without evidence, eight Chicago anarchists were tried and convicted-not of actual murder, but of "conspiracy to

Which side are you on?

commit murder” and for “inciting,” rather than committing, violence in Haymarket Square. The struggle culminated in the trial and execution of four of the movement's leaders, including anarchists August Spies and Albert Parsons.

In 1893, Illinois governor John Peter Altgeld finally issued a pardon, acknowledging that no evidence incriminated any of those convicted in the bombing. Nonetheless, the Haymarket incident unleashed a wave of antiradical and anti-immigrant hysteria. Newspaper headlines screamed for revenge against “Dynamarchists” and “Red Ruffians.”

Because German immigrants provided the largest base for anarchism, the Chicago Times described America's “enemy forces” as “rag-tag and bob-tail cutthroats from the Rhine, the Danube, the Vuistukla and the Elbe.”

Today, Mexicans, El Salvadorans and other Latinos have brought with them traditions of class struggle absent since McCarthyism excised radicals from the U.S. labor movement in the 1950s. These traditions hold the potential to revitalize the U.S. labor movement, if it welcomes them.

Only in 2000 did the AFL-CIO finally reverse its longstanding opposition to the rights of undocumented immigrants, making possible a historic opportunity for uniting workers across racial and ethnic barriers. But labor leaders must also reverse their long-standing aversion to class struggle for the movement to succeed.

Far from creating a backlash, the return of struggle is the key to U.S. labor's survival.

(This article was first published by the US Socialist Worker - journal of the ISO)