



Speak Out Now

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May Day: Celebrate Working Class Power and Possibility

On May 1, workers around the world celebrate May Day, or International Workers Day. It was born out of the struggles of U.S. workers in the 1880s. In 1889, May Day was proclaimed an international holiday of the working class by an organization of socialist parties committed to abolishing capitalism. Today, it remains a time to honor past working class struggles, and celebrate those of today. It also reminds us of our potential power in the struggles that are sure to come.

“Eight hours for work, eight hours for rest, and eight hours for what you will,” was the slogan of the workers in 1886 whose struggle led to May Day, when workers in Chicago and throughout the country fought to demand an eight-hour work day. Big capitalists brutally exploited workers, including children, and forced many to work 12 or more hours a day. Workers had finally had enough, and were ready to demand better.

So hundreds of thousands organized, with some battling the police. In Chicago at least four workers were killed and another 70 were wounded. But this nationwide struggle resulted in many workers winning the eight-hour day. This is something many forget was won – the bosses didn’t plan the eight-hour work day.

So since the early 20th century, workers all over the world have marched in the streets and rallied on May Day to celebrate the power and victories of the working class. After all, we are the ones who do the work that makes this society run, so our potential power should not be forgotten.

This May Day, we can remember struggles of the past as we look towards our potential for the future. Not only did workers win the eight-hour work day through struggle, but workplace safety protections, voting rights, the right to form a union, minimum wage standards, and much more. In all these circumstances, concessions were not given, they were fought for.

Even in this past period, we can see that without being organized, workers would not have recently won unions at Amazon or Starbucks locations.

Workers are a class over three billion strong. Globally, nearly 900 million of us are responsible for growing food. Almost 700 million of us are involved in making the everyday items we use. About 60 million of us care for the sick in healthcare. A day without workers is a day without transportation, manufacturing of goods, healthcare, water sanitation, child care, and so much more. When workers fold our arms, the world stops – that is the power we hold.

But those who control the corporations and the politicians who represent them organize our work to serve their interests. They want to hide our collective power from us. They want us to see ourselves only as individuals. They tell us that if we “pull ourselves up by the bootstraps,” we can be successful and better our individual conditions.

But there’s only one way we can guarantee better conditions for ourselves and others. And that’s by seeing ourselves as a part of a global class of workers whose power lies in our collective strength. We can use our power for the benefit of all, and in the interests of a living planet.

Though today it may feel hard to celebrate, May Day reminds us of the future we can have. In the face of tremendous violence and oppression, workers of the past were able to organize to win an eight-hour day. If we organize and mobilize, we too can win a different future.

We are the majority. We make society run. We already know how to do the work – we just have to re-organize it to benefit the interests of humanity. If we want a world without war, poverty, racism, hunger, homelessness and climate disruption, we have the power to bring such a world into being.

Happy May Day!