

May Day

(The Day for Workers)

An International Poster Exhibit

The first of May has a long and notable history as one of the world's principal festivals. The origin of the May Day as a day for celebration dates back to the days, even before the birth of Christ. And like many ancient festivals it too has a Pagan connection.

Over the past century, May Day came to acquire new meanings. By the 20th century May Day came to be regarded as a red letter day and became a festival of the laboring class in Socialist countries. And it is all rooted to the labor movement in United States during the 19th century. Then this country had been witnessing labor unrests and agitations for over a century, but mostly in an unorganized manner. In the 19th century it became more organized with the workers becoming worried over their position in the mainstream society. The year 1886 was a troubled one in labor relations. There were nearly 1,600 strikes, involving about 600,000 workers, with the eight-hour day being the most prominent item in the demands of labor. About half of these strikes were called on May Day.

Events in Chicago made May 1 as an important day in the history of the Labor Movement in America. Though it did not take place on May Day itself, it was one of the many strikes called for May Day in 1886. It was against the McCormick Harvesting Machine Company in Chicago. On May 3, fighting broke out along the picket lines. When police intervened to restore order, several strikers were injured or killed. Union leaders called a protest meeting at Haymarket Square for the evening of May 4. It was there yet another gory incident took place as a result of a bomb explosion. Seven policemen were killed and many were injured. Eight unionists, alleged to be responsible for the incident, were arrested, tried, and convicted of murder. Four of them were hanged, and one committed suicide.

Though strikes went on to be held. Some other unions came to the forefront. One of them was an association of French Socialists, called the Second International. It was in 1889, they declared May Day to be devoted to labor and its problems. They renamed it "Labor Day" and it was the occasion for important political demonstrations. In France, the Maypole was already regarded as the symbol of French Revolution. And perhaps the French union was partly motivated by that spirit behind the day.

The idea really gained ground in other parts of the world with the International Socialist congress of 1889 in Paris. It was the congress that designated it as an international labor day. While in the United States and Canada, Labor Day still continues to be observed on the first Monday in September, the rest of the world observes it on May 1 or other dates.

The relevancy of the ideals of May Day is in stark focus today because of the attacks on working people. Public employees are the target of the hour. The attacks on the unions are masked behind the rhetoric of budget crises. Rather than look at the massive reduction in tax rates on the very rich and corporations over the past 30 years, workers are being faulted for having “too generous benefits”. As commercial advertising calls for more consumption, a political poster calls for more action.

The placards next to the posters give the main identification, the country where the poster was produced, the organization it was produced for, translations to English (where necessary), the name of the artist (where known) and the date created (where known).

The posters are from a collection of more than 7100 of Stephen Lewis. He is a long-time activist in the labor movement, and the former Treasurer of his union. Stephen has exhibited at a number of public libraries in Massachusetts, Boston City Hall, and two of the state Heritage parks. He has presented at the annual conference of the National Council on Public History, and on some cable television programs. He can be reached by email at lewisposters@gmail.com or at Facebook under [labor/progressive political posters](#). The posters/photos were contributed by friends, collected at conferences, visits to some of the organizations, and from connections made through the internet.

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*The exhibit is running concurrently at the Westborough and Southborough Public Libraries