

# The First of May

“**M**AY DAY” will be celebrated all over the earth—as usual. This does not mean that here in Britain, yonder in France, in Germany, and beyond, in Russia, China, Japan, the South Seas and the U.S.A., the workers, moved by a common impulse, will, in set form, make manifest and visible their community of objective and aspiration. It means that in Russia the workers will celebrate their triumph and their fervent hope the day is near when the workers of other lands can join them in rejoicing.

That in France, Germany and most European countries, the workers will (in ways that vary, as vary the ferocity of their class enemies) demonstrate their will to accomplish *their* share at any rate of the “emancipation of the human race.” And in Britain? Ah! that is another story!

The originators of the Workers’ Annual Festival on the First of May were perfectly clear as to their objective. They knew—and had they been likely to forget their rulers would soon have reminded them—that “the emancipation of the working class must be the work of the workers themselves.” Therefore, they proposed to their fellow town-workers that the time-honoured peasants’ holiday on the First of May should be observed by them as a holiday likewise.

They had only newly been dragged from the land into the vortex of the mill and the mine. They had been uprooted, and scattered. In the first bewilderment of the transition they had been overwhelmed by the vastness of the powers which had taken possession of them, and made them into machines for its ends. Then, little by little, as use and wont made terrors into common-places, and multiplying exactions made misery too fierce to be borne, they looked for a way of escape. If not back to the air and the fields, at any rate forward, to a state of things in which a worker need not be either an ass stumbling, flogged, beneath burdens, or a machine worn out in heat, clatter and grime, and so flung aside in contempt.

They saw their way in a flash—in the “solidarity” of the wage-slave lay the magic which could alone bring them relief from all they suffered, and satisfaction for all that they craved. They proposed, these pioneers of the First of May, quite soberly and prosaically—yet with an intensity of insight that may well

command admiration—that the workers should take a holiday on the First of May in order to fraternise with each other and with their comrades the workers in the fields, and the countryside.

And then? Well, it should be remembered that they lived too long ago to know that the “tactics” of the working class struggle would become a theme upon which metaphysicians, politicians, and students of history would elaborate libraries. These simple ones would have expressed it quite simply—if the workers in mass take a holiday in defiance of the boss, that will be good training for acting as a mass in other ways—it may be for moving as a mass to dethrone the exploiters!

### **ON THE CONTINENT—IN BRITAIN.**

On the Continent the May Day celebration has never entirely lost its primitive innocence. It still is a one-day demonstration strike designed and carried through to the greater glory of solidarity and the justification of the working class militant here upon earth. In Russia, of course, it loses its defiant character since it is a public festival honoured by the Workers' State. But its origin as a militant workers' festival is preserved by the practice of forming the processions at the factories and marching thence to the points of assembly. In France, and possibly in Germany, too, the exhibition of red flags and revolutionary emblems may be forbidden—as usual. As usual some will be exhibited, and the usual scuffle with the police will give zest to the enjoyment. In Italy, and the Balkans, processions and meetings will be forbidden—the factories will stand idle notwithstanding and the meetings will be held.

In Britain we shall be free to meet—if we wish—and free to march. We have a Labour Government. Socialists (of a sort) are in control of the police (more or less!) and Revolutionary Social Democrats are plentiful in the House of Commons. Theoretically, we are a revolutionary nation. At the name of Britain and its Prime Minister the Labour and Socialist International swells near to bursting with pride. In every Parliament in Western Europe the faithful can be found who quiver with enthusiasm at the thought of the splendid advance of the sturdy British toilers led by the stalwart MacDonald and the fiery I.L.P. Most of them will march on May Day; but the idols of their idolatry will stick fast—*until the Sunday after.*

There are times, of course, when by the grace of the Calendar the First of May falls upon a Sunday. When that happens the solidarity of British Labour with the rest of the

workers of the world is almost complete—(provided the weather is fine!). When it doesn't the First of May is celebrated in Britain by the Building Trades Unions, the "extremists," the Jewish Workers (man, woman and child), the National League of the Blind, and the Special Department from Scotland Yard.

That a good many British workers derive not a little spiritual consolation from the pageantry and speech-making even of the First Sunday in May cannot be denied. Neither can it be denied that a day's pay is a day's pay and a serious consideration. But when that is said and done with, what excuse remains for the British custom? There never was any point in May Day beyond its defiant affirmation of solidarity in the face of risk, or even actual loss. Take from May Day its *general strike* character; take from it the note of *international* unanimity, and it becomes the tamest and the most meaningless of rituals. And held on a Sunday—a British Sunday—with speakers and audience all in their best "go to meeting" clothes, and it becomes indistinguishable from any of the many middle-class manifestations and pageantries which follow each other monotonously all through the summer. It becomes a boredom and a foolish pretence—as disgusting as the old Chartist ending his days as a star speaker at a Band of Hope.

### **WHERE ARE THE REBELS ?**

Those learned in these matters tell us that the movement which merged into history as the Christian Church, thereafter to be incorporated into the coercive apparatus of every State in "Christendom" took its rise in a whole series of slave conspiracies to overthrow the Roman Empire. When Constantine made Christianity an official religion of the Empire (they tell us) he "nobbled" it. The old words were repeated; the old ceremonies gone through. But everything that the words had indicated by concealing, and the ceremonies had revealed by indirection was carefully purged out and made away with. The old prophecies of a "good time coming" for the poor and the needy, of a rest for the weary and healing for those beaten with many stripes were "re-interpreted" into promises of the permanence of suffering here upon earth compensated by never-ending splendours in another world altogether. Thus a mighty engine of revolt was turned into a still mightier engine for stabilisation. That which had set out to "put down the mighty from their seat and exalt them of low degree" remained to reinforce privilege with power, and coercive authority with supernatural terrors.

Within the time of most of us now living the occupants of the Governmental Benches were, almost to a man, heralds and leaders of revolt. The soap-box was their portion; and in the shades of the Red Flag they developed the faculties which draw them laudations from the public press. Hardly a man of them has not in his day addressed three shop-shutters, two comrades, a "drunk" and a dog as "Fellow Workers and Citizens." Hardly one of them who has not lamented in his day the dead and damnable ignorance and apathy of the working class. Now that the ignorance has been so far dissipated that they are where they are, and the apathy has given place to angry activity all along the line, where are these one-time "rebels" and "agitators"? How many of them will testify their allegiance to the faith that they fed and which has given them place and distinction by turning out with their "Comrades and Fellow Workers" on the First of May?

True they will be "on deck" on the First Sunday in May—every man and every woman of them. They will have hopeful words to say of the spring time—natural and political. They will produce themselves as the buds and blossoms evidencing the political spring-time, and the burden of their song will be—"Wait! wait! wait! until the crop is ripe for the harvest."

### **RESPECTABLE LABOURISTS.**

Take a look (in imagination) over the world. Picture the millions of toilers in all lands whom the preaching and teaching of Socialism for half a century has led to hope for deliverance. See them each in their degree calculating their chances of escape. And see them all without exception looking to the British working class, and its spokesman (now the Government of Britain) yearning for the signal that the hour has struck. See in particular the Socialist and Labour International (galled and fretted under persecution from the Right and Communist criticism from the Left) looking to their fortunate brethren in the High Places of Britain and longing for even a gesture of allegiance to the old International faith.

They will look in vain. Downing Street is a busy place, and it is hard to see the international proletariat through a screen of Press photographers. The Continental adherents of the Second International can wait until the First Sunday in May—and even then they must restrain their expectations within the bounds of British constitutional expediency. The cares and responsibilities of office weigh heavily on the shoulders of the I.L.P. and the

British Empire must not be allowed to come to harm. As for the international proletariat, they must as reasonable people wait their turn, and the only thing certain about that is that it is— not yet!

Had the Labour Party lived up to its obligations as a member of the Second International it would have made this May Day a public holiday. It didn't. Respectable British Socialism, led by its "Labour" Premier with scripture quotations on his lips, and psalms chanted in his drawing room, has started upon the path which will lead the Second International into the place and function of the Christian Church under Constantine. Yet a little while and the "New Church," will evolve its Holy Inquisition, and the First Sunday in May be brightened by bonfires lit to burn Communists all round the British Imperial Globe.

T. A. JACKSON.

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We are anxious that every worker who agrees with us, should join up, and do his share in the spreading of our views, and the realisation of our common aim.

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Our influence amongst the masses is increasing, as also is the circulation of our literature, but our membership is not increasing in proportion. This state of things can, and must be altered, and *you can alter it* if you are not a member by joining up, and if you are a member, by getting others whom you know to do so.

The Recruiting Committee will give all the information and guidance it can, and in return asks you for your suggestions and experiences in recruiting.

If you are not a member and do not know any Party members in your locality, write to us at Party Headquarters, 16, King Street, Covent Garden, and we will put you in touch.

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RECRUITING SERGEANT.