

## May Day's Meaning Today

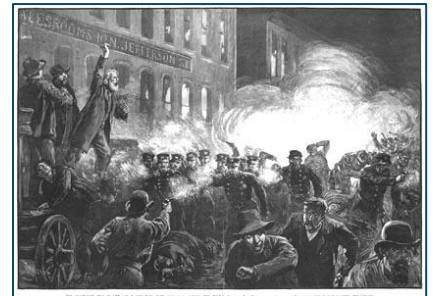
Alvin Finkel

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In 1889, the founding congress of the Second International voted to make the next May 1 a day of commemoration of the American labour movement's eight-hour day campaign that originated on May 1, 1886, and then faced police violence and three worker deaths three days later in Chicago's Haymarket Square. For socialist workers, suppression of the [Haymarket](#) demonstrators exemplified capitalist repression of workers' aspirations and the need for a socialist economic system and workers' states to

replace capitalist relations of production and state structures that protected capitalists' control over workers. Large May Day European events in 1890 caused the [Second International](#) to proclaim May Day as an annual day of international working-class solidarity.

May Day came to Canada in 1906 when about a thousand Montreal workers paraded and heard speakers in English, French, Russian, and Italian in rented halls. One year later, notes historian [Craig Heron](#), ten times as many Montreal workers assembled on the Champs de Mars waving red banners, refusing police orders to disperse. Officers on horseback beat them with truncheons, and socialists successfully fought assault charges against demonstrators.



May Day solidarity rallies persisted in Montreal, the city with the highest rate of infant mortality in North America. Elsewhere in Canada, the balance of social forces with a dispersed working-class population sandwiched between large areas of agriculture and inhospitable geography, favoured employers and the capitalist state. Canada's working class, while often involved in massive strikes, proved largely unable before World War One to form lasting unions of industrial workers, particularly precarious migrant workers in railway, lumber, and mining camps.

The exception was skilled workers who formed narrowly defined trades unions. Those workers largely eschewed militant May Days in favour of celebratory marches and feasts on Labour Day, the state-declared national holiday in Canada the first Monday in September from 1894 onwards. As Craig Heron and Steve Penfold explain in [The Workers' Festival](#), the early Labour Day provided a "craftsmen's spectacle." The unions proudly advertised their craft and its symbols, celebrating achievements of an aristocracy of labour rather than calling for a socialist reordering of society.

As The Graphic History Collective's [May Day: A Graphic History of Protest](#) demonstrates, May Day commemorations spread across Canada after World War One. Union membership swelled during the war when labour shortages temporarily blunted the ability of capitalists and the state to suppress unionization campaigns. Actual and threatened solidarity strikes, inspired by the philosophy of the [Industrial Workers of the World](#), were adopted by the Socialist Party. Along with the Russian Revolution, such actions increased worker confidence and militancy.

Capitalists and the state took advantage of post-war unemployment to reverse worker gains and crush militancy. That induced resistance across Canada, most famously but hardly limited to the [Winnipeg General Strike](#). The Communist Party formed in 1921, and with its connections to the Russian Revolution and European socialism

more generally, made May Day strikes in Canadian cities a priority. The size of such events exploded as the Great Depression stole jobs and incomes. ""

The state responded with suppression by the RCMP, the Ontario Provincial Police, and municipal police services. The government banned the Communist Party in 1931, making use of Section 98 of the Criminal Code that had been proclaimed in 1919 to criminalize working-class dissent as "sedition." Nonetheless, in 1935, estimates of participants in May Day marches were 20,000 in Toronto, 10,000 in Vancouver, and 5,000 in both Montreal and Winnipeg. The demands everywhere were for guaranteed work at union wages for all workers with those unable to find work to be provided with unemployment insurance paid for through taxes on corporations and the wealthy.

May Day largely disappeared in Canada during the Cold War, with the trade union movement largely content with the "historical compromise" between capital and labour that granted unions a legal but limited role within capitalism that included union suppression of class struggle in workplaces between contracts. By the early 1970s, as a radicalized Quebec labour movement adopted anti-capitalist manifestos and a [Common Front](#) of public workers, May Day was revived in Montreal as an anti-capitalist day of worker solidarity.

Over time, the size of demonstrations waxed and waned. In 2024, there were two rival marches, a peaceful one focused on climate change, housing, and the rising cost of living, and a more militant, anti-capitalist march where demonstrators used smoke bombs and destruction of public property to declare their determination for root-and-branch change. Elsewhere, May Day marches in Canada are small, militant, and organized by the revolutionary left, with the mainstream union movement largely absent.

Mayworks 2024



[May Works Festivals](#) of Working People and the Arts, organized since 1986, have attempted to spread May Day activities through many days and to use the arts to "question migrant labour practices, forced displacement, as well as the unbridled expansion of gig work." The ups and downs of May Day, an effort to go beyond individual worker grievances to raise questions of supplanting capitalism with socialism, reveal a great deal about the balance of class forces in Canada in various periods. The limited success of May Day in most cities in recent years is somewhat surprising considering the

solidarity that many strikes have witnessed but may suggest that such solidarities remain episodic rather than reflecting enduring growth in revolutionary class consciousness on the part of Canadian workers. □

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#### About Perspectives

Perspectives are concise opinion pieces meant to spark public dialogue and encourage new ways of thinking on a range of work and labour related issues. These articles are meant to inform and promote worker perspectives in a manner that challenges the current state of knowledge in a particular field.

#### About the Centre

The Global Labour Research Centre confronts the major challenges and injustices encountered by workers, families and communities within the global economy. The GLRC engages in the study of work, employment and labour, organizing its activities around: the impact of the changing nature of work and employment on labour rights; interrelationships between migration, citizenship and work; gender and race relations in work and labour movements; the revitalization of workers' movements; and work and health. The GLRC is a hub for pan-university collaboration with a community engagement model that encompasses a range of labour and community partners.