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# World's workers unite on May Day

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MAY DAY! May Day!! May Day!!! is a distress call. Usually, ships and aircraft in distress send out this call, and all who receive it know that there is immediate danger and that the caller needs urgent help.

The May Day to be marked across the world today is an appropriate time to sound the distress alarm on food shortages.

Coincidentally, the origin of the May Day, that is the International Workers Day, is based on the international distress call by American Labour following the May 3, 1886 Massacre of Workers in Chicago, and the follow up judicial murder of their leaders.

Following the Industrial Revolution which began in mid 18th Century England, the phenomenon of people paid for their mental and physical labour took root. The emergent employers were ruthless as they made their employees work for 14-18 hours daily.

## Enslavement

To stop this enslavement of workers, an agitation began globally to reduce work hours. The workers argued that in every 24 hours, they can give a third to their employers, one third for sleep or rest, and the balance eight hours for family, food, transportation to work, etcetera.

Thus began the agitation for "Eight Hours for Work-Eight Hours for Rest-Eight Hours for What Will". The slogan was "Eight Hours to constitute a Work Day!" As part of the global agitation, the American Federation of Organized Trade and Labour Unions at its 1884 convention passed a resolution that

"Eight hours shall constitute a legal day's Labour from and after May 1, 1886". On that day, a general strike was called and 350,000 workers in 11,562 establishments across the US went on strike.

On May 3, 1886, the third day of the strike, employers at the McCormick Harvester Factory, Chicago where 1,400 workers had gone on strike, brought in 300 scabs guarded by about 500 policemen to break the strike. When the striking workers protested, the police shot into them, killing four and injuring many.

Rallies and protests against this police brutality were called for the next day May 4, 1886. The major rally held at the Haymarket Square, Chicago. As the rally was coming to a close, armed police arrived and ordered the crowd to disperse. As if on queue, a bomb was thrown at the police killing one and injuring five.

Until this day, nobody knows who threw the bomb; the employers and police claimed a worker did, the workers claimed it was an agent provocateur paid by the police. The incident was used as a pretext to detain hundreds of workers and Labour Leaders.

Finally, eight of them were charged. One of the eight; Samuel J. Fielden was addressing the rally when the bomb was thrown, so he could not have been the one who threw the bomb.

The other seven were not at the rally when the police arrived, so they could not have thrown the bomb. The prosecution's argument was that the unknown bomb thrower must have been influenced by speeches the men had made over time. In other words, the men were charged not for the offence, but for their ideas and the exercise of freedom of speech!

They were charged before Justice Joseph E. Gary. The state's Attorney, Julius S. Grinnell told the court: "These men have been selected, picked out by the grand jury and indicted because they were the leaders ... convict these men, make examples of them, hang them and save our institutions, our society".

One of the accused, August Spies told the court "If you think that by hanging us you can stamp out the Labour movement ... then hang us! ... It is a subterranean fire. You cannot put it out".

The court found the men guilty, sentenced seven to death by hanging and the eighth; Oscar Neebe to fifteen years imprisonment. The US Supreme Court refused to review the case. Unions, Workers, Parliamentarians and activists in countries like Britain, France, Holland, Spain, Russia and Italy protested this little veiled attempt to judicially assassinate the labour leaders.

Partly as a result, the sentences of Samuel Fielden and Eugene Schwab were commuted to life. Louis Lingg committed suicide. On November 11, 1887, August Spies, Albert Parsons, George Engel and Adolph Fischer were hanged. On June 26, 1893, Governor Peter Altgeld pardoned the convicts on the basis "that the defendants were not proven to be guilty of the crime".

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At the centenary of the fall of the Bastille, Socialists met on July 14, 1889 in Paris under the second International and decided that the 1st of May, the date the American Workers Strike began, should be set aside as International Labour Day.

On May 1, 1890 Workers in United States, Chile, Denmark, Britain, Switzerland, Holland, Peru, Hungary, France and Italy marked the first May Day. It soon spread across the world. Ironically, the US does not officially recognize May Day. Canada is also among the exceptions. The first May Day celebration was under the theme: "For Peace and Against Threats of War".

The International Workers Day is now celebrated by workers across the world. There is still a lot to be done regarding occupational safety and health, woman employment issues and gender concerns, child labour and bonded labour, social dialogue and labour market information system.

Labourers are facing hazards at their workplace as there are a rising number of accidents in electrical and chemical, transport and construction and engineering industries while there is a considerable rise in occupational diseases in agriculture and textiles on account of inhuman working conditions and use of chemicals and pesticides in agriculture.

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) has estimated that every year 2.2 million workers die as a result of accidents and 270 million suffer injuries and 160 million suffer sickness due to accidents and occupational diseases every year.

Governments should force industrialists, entrepreneurs and businessmen to follow labour standards for promotion of safety and health practices at work. The Government should also take initiatives for imparting proper education and training to employers and workers at workplace besides government officials, concerning labour inspection machinery.

#### Rights at work

"The rules of the global economy should be aimed at improving the rights, livelihoods, security, and opportunities of people, families and communities around the world." - World Commission on the Social Dimension of Globalization, 2004.

Since its early days, the International Labour Organisation has sought to define and guarantee labour rights and improve conditions for working people by building a system of international labour standards expressed in the form of Conventions, Recommendations and Codes of Practice.

The ILO has since adopted more than 180 ILO Conventions and 190 Recommendations covering all aspects of the world of work. This body of international labour law was recently reviewed by the Governing Body which determined that more than 70 of the Conventions adopted before 1985 remained fully up to date and the remainder required revision or withdrawal.

In addition, dozens of Codes of Practice have been developed. In areas as varied as maternity leave and protection of migrants, these standards play an important role in the drawing up of national legislation.

A supervisory process helps to ensure that standards ratified by individual member States are applied and the ILO provides advice in the drafting of national labour laws.

With the adoption of the Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work in 1998, ILO member States decided to uphold a set of core labour standards regardless of whether they had ratified the relevant conventions. These are basic human rights and a central plank of decent work.

The Declaration covers four areas:

**Freedom of Association:** The right of workers and employers to form and join organizations of their choice is an integral part of a free and open society. It is a basic civil liberty that serves as a building block for social and economic progress. Linked to this is the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining. Voice and representation are an important part of decent work.

**Forced Labour:** The ILO is also pressing for effective national laws and stronger enforcement mechanisms, such as legal sanctions and vigorous prosecution against those who exploit forced labourers. By raising public awareness, the ILO seeks to shine a spotlight on such human and labour rights violations.

#### Discrimination

Hundreds of millions of people suffer from discrimination in the world of work. This not only violates a most basic human right, but has wider social and economic consequences.

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Discrimination stifles opportunities, wasting the human talent needed for economic progress and accentuating social tensions and inequalities. Combating discrimination is an essential part of promoting decent work, and success on this front is felt well beyond the workplace.

Child Labour: There are more than 200 million children working throughout the world, many full-time. They are deprived of adequate education, good health and basic freedoms.

Of these, 126 million - or one in every 12 children worldwide - are exposed to hazardous forms of child labour, work that endangers their physical, mental or moral well-being.

As with other aspects of decent work, eliminating child labour is a development as well as human rights issue. Children must receive the education and training they need to become productive adults in decent employment.

Nearly half of the world's 2.8 billion workers are unable to earn enough to lift themselves and their family members above the US \$ 2 a day poverty line. But poverty is not just a problem for the poor.

World political and social stability and security is difficult to envision if such large numbers of people continue to be trapped in cycles of poverty or see few opportunities in a global system that seems discriminatory and unfair.

Combating poverty and promoting social integration is about more than increasing incomes. It is also about rights, dignity and communication giving people economic, social and political empowerment.

Breaking the cycle of poverty involves creating new cycles of opportunity and local wealth creation.

The ILO has encouraged Governments and international organizations to respect the opinions of poor people and to design solutions that are tailor-made rather than 'one size fits all'. Furthermore, those solutions should be underpinned by greater policy coherence both among international agencies and within them.

"People in poverty go through each day with the will to survive, but without the support and possibilities to move up the ladder of opportunity. Imagine where their efforts could take them if that ladder were in place. Our common responsibility is to help put it there," says the ILO Director-General, Juan Somavia.

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