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Labor's International Day

THE First of May this year of 1924, according to custom, will be celebrated by the advanced sections of the proletarians of modern capitalism, as International Labor Day.

From time immemorial the laboring class of Europe have held this day as a brand plucked from the burning, and have devoted it to demonstrations of working-class solidarity and recognition of their common interests against the rulers and oppressors.

Originally, in the dim historic past of our savage forbears, the observance of this festival had been religious in character, a day of rejoicing at the evidence of the survival of life in vegetation after the long winter, and for sacrificing and petitioning the demonic powers that the earth might yield abundantly its fruits in the year to come.

In the days of the Greek and Roman empires it was already an old established festival. The people gathered together to render placatory homage, through strange rites to Ceres (Greek: Demeter), Goddess of Agriculture and Fruitfulness, and to Minerva (Greek: Athena), Goddess of Manual Labor and protectress of working women and working men.

The empire states of the ancient world accumulated their wealth and reared the mighty structures of their civil and military polity upon bloody rapine and conquest, and upon the ill requited labors of myriads of toiling slaves:

"Monarchs and conquerors there
Proud o'er prostrate millions trod."

And such was the superfluity of human flesh and blood, it was recorded of Rome that slaves were "butchered to make a Roman holiday": butchered in the circus by fellow slaves. Immortal! No!—Priestly theology of the time conveniently maintained that slaves had no soul. Even Plato, the enlightened humanist, only conceded them a half-soul.

The introduction of chattel slavery on such a huge scale profoundly affected the course of Rome's history. The lower strata of the free citizenry—the small producers—were finally ruined by the competition of cheap slave labor and were reduced to a condition analogous to the propertyless proletarians of modern capitalism. The state was in the end compelled, in the interests of civil peace, to maintain them. Doles and circuses, doles and circuses until—Rome fell—fell to rise no more, having become economically inefficient, intellectually bankrupt and morally infamous. Tiberius Gracchus, one of the noble minded Gracchi brothers, in Plutarch's life of that Roman, gives this account of the conditions of the poorer plebs. He says:

"The wild beasts of Italy have their caves to retire to, but the brave men who spill their blood in her cause have nothing but air and light. Without houses, without any settled habitations they wander from place to place with their wives and children; and their generals do but mock them, when at the head of their armies they exhort their men to fight for their sepulchres and domestic gods; for among such numbers perhaps there is not a Roman who

has an altar that belonged to his ancestors, or a sepulchre in which their ashes rest. The private soldiers die, to advance the wealth and luxury of the great, and they are called masters of the world, while they have not a foot of ground in their possession."

There is a truth in the aphorism that "History holds up the mirror to life."

Rome fell, but prior to the fall, her agonizing decline during hundreds of years consisted of one long record of slave revolts, of savage suppression, of bloody massacres and exterminations, and also, in addition, of class struggles due to conflicting economic interests among the free citizenry.

It is said, it was as these conditions began to develop that the oppressed and toiling multitudes, proletarians and chattel slaves alike, appropriated the first of May as a day of special significance to themselves. Hope springs eternal in the human breast. After the long dread winter of their oppression, May Day would symbolize for them the pathetic hope that they were on the threshold of better days to come, when the earth and the fullness thereof should be theirs, a hope which down through the succeeding ages has been unextinguished—is unextinguishable while lives the spirit of man.

It is also said that white, in heathen mythology, was emblematic of degree in rank. It was the color used by the gens or patrician families and by the priesthood, while that of the strictly laboring element was red and brown, dun and murk. White and shining purple could deck the bodies of those who did not labor, and so these colors became a mark of distinction and could not clothe the bodies of those creatures smoked and smeared at the furnace and the anvil. The function of these creatures with no soul was to keep their masters white, clean—washed and fat.

White was the color of the aristocratic flags of military Romans and Greeks, while on the other hand, red banners flew over the labor communes. The sculptured images of Ceres, Goddess of Agriculture and Fruitfulness, and of Minerva, Goddess of Manual Labor and of Working Women and Men, were robed in flaming red. Flaming red became the symbolic color of the suppressed laboring masses and of struggle for freedom.

Since those olden times the ruling classes have frowned upon May Day: its class associations were too vivid, and attempts to stamp out its observance have often succeeded for a time.

Historical data on the observance of this festival during the middle ages is very meagre because bourgeois historians and chroniclers have suppressed accounts of it insofar as its exclusively class associations are concerned. Typical of their way of treating it, are their accounts of its observance in England. They report the entire population as going "A Maying"—gathering flowers in the country to decorate the villages; other features were sports and dances, chief of which was the "Maypole" dance. We are pictured a "Merry England," but to those who know the history of the working-class, it is a mythical England that is pictured.

Be that as it may, Puritanism came, and the gospel of salvation by work. Later came the machine age, when we have neither a merry nor a mythical England, but a very sorrowful, grimly realistic England for its underlying population. The machine age of the modern world in many features has similarities with the ancient world. The competition of machine production brings ruin to the small handicraftsman, and a mass of propertyless proletarians appear again in the world's history. They are the modern wage workers. And lo! A new social phenomenon appears which the historians and the editors can not hide: "A spectre is haunting Europe."

The revolutionary year of 1848 comes bringing English Chartism and other forms of proletarian political disturbances in France and Germany, with adumbrations throughout the rest of the world. The year 1870 brings another terrifying shock to the bourgeois world, in the Paris Commune where the Red Flag flamed again "o'er the embattled proletarians." But, again the revolt is stamped out, but—Let us quote Karl Marx on the matter, from his "Civil War in France." He says:

"That after the most tremendous war of modern times (the Franco-German, 1870) the conquering and the conquered hosts should fraternize for the common massacre of the proletariat—this unparalleled event does indicate, not, as Bismarck thinks, the final repression of a new society upheaving, but the crumbling into dust of bourgeois society. . . Working men's Paris, with its Commune, will be forever celebrated as the glorious harbinger of a new society. Its martyrs are enshrined in the great heart of the working-class. Its exterminators history has already nailed to that eternal pillory from which all prayers of their priests will not avail to redeem them."

And then, 1914 and the great suicidal war of capitalism. And then, Russia—Red Russia—and proletarian Communism, so often crushed to earth, now risen again.

Our minds have travelled the long gray years of working-class travail and struggle, back to the dawn of history. We have been with the victims of the hell of modern industrialism, with the villeins, the serfs, the bond thralls of feudalism, with the chattel slaves of "the grandeur that was Rome," and the helots of "the glory that was Greece." We have been with overwork and starvation, with hangings, shootings, burnings at the stake, crucifixions, the hiss of stinging whips and branding irons, with massacres and exterminations—and yet—the hope deferred of the oppressed of all the ages draws nearer its realization.

Comrades! To pass in historical retrospect the agonizing triumphs and defeats endured by our class in ages past should, on this First of May, their day as it is ours, give us understanding and stimulate our energies for the great historic task of the working-class to free human society from class rule and exploitation.

In the year 1924 the workers of the world find themselves in a state of discontent that is prompted by the miseries and uncertainties of their working lives. The present links the past to what may be made of the future. Let that future be moulded with the aid of a comprehending working-class, keen to realise the nature of its problems, prompt and practical in remedy and having its ideals always leavening all its activity.

C. S.