

# THE SIGNIFICANCE of MAY DAY

BY CHARLES LESTOR.

This year the First of May will be celebrated as Labor Day by thousands of workers who have hitherto not taken any part in these gatherings, and I sincerely hope a short statement of the real significance of these May Day celebrations will not be out of place.

In the Middle Ages the First of May was universally kept as a day of holiday and pleasure. But May Day was also celebrated at a much earlier period. It is in fact very difficult to ascertain how great is the antiquity of the May Day Festival. The revival of vegetation which marks nature at May-time so far as any rate as the North temperate zone is concerned has been the occasion for various ceremonies from even primitive times. The "Floralia" of the Romans, which in its turn is believed to be derived from India, was no doubt the forerunner of the May Day festivities, which in England were popular for centuries.

The "Floralia," or floral games, were held in honor of Flora, the goddess of spring, and lasted four or five days. Among the old Celtic nations of Europe, too, the Beltain festivals were akin to the Maypole dances. Gigantic fires, were kindled on the hill-tops to joyously proclaim the approach of summer. As the floral games of the Romans celebrated the awakening of floral life in warmer climates, so did the Beltain fires of the Celts in colder latitudes hail the appearance of the sun, which, entering into its highest altitudes, meant giving fresh life and warmth to the earth after the frosts and snows of winter. Amongst the peasantry of Ireland, the Isle of Man, and the Scottish Highlands the Beltain celebrations were in vogue, to a slight extent, even up to last century.

There can be no doubt that the beauty of flower and leaf which nature brings forth at the end of April and the beginning of May reflected itself in the minds of men and women accustomed to a healthy life in the open air. The divorce of the vast majority of our working population of today from open air life has largely killed that happy enjoyment of spring-time. The development of the factory system steadily crushed out that joyous spirit which found its expression in the love of that profusion of flower and blossom which called it forth. It is a fact that most of our class have lost the power to receive those pleasurable impressions of nature which gave our ancestors such keen enjoyment. Happiness came more spontaneously to them than it does to us, creatures of steam and electricity, whose brains and sinews are the property of the employing classes.

The central feature of the May Day observance was the Maypole Dance. Let us see what it was.

The parish of St. Andrew Under-shaft and its Maypole is celebrated by the great English poet Chaucer, who speaks of an empty braggart: "Right well aloft and high ye beare your head, As ye would beare the great shaft of Cornhill."

Stow, who is buried in this church, says that in his time the shaft was set up "Every year on May Day in the morning in the midst of the street before the south door of the said church which shaft when it was set on end, and fixed in the ground, was higher than the church steeple. The people used to dress themselves with flowers on May first and the Maypole was the centre of a ring of merry dancers."

In connection with the May Day Festivities was a distinct set of sports. In England they represented the adventures of Robin Hood and his merry men. Every parish in the county had its May Pole and its May celebrations. All this has vanished. The factories claim their human machines and will not be gainsaid.

Popular history of that period known as the Middle Ages, lay bare the tyranny of the kings and the rapacity of the nobles; but a deeper inquiry tells us that at the period when May Day festivities were universally celebrated throughout England the economic condition of the wage-earner was relatively to the general conditions of the times, far and away better and higher than it has ever been since. The production of goods was carried on upon a scale which rendered the individual worker master of his own implements of labor, and the products thus manufactured were made primarily for use, only the surplus over and above that needed to satisfy local wants being brought into exchange. Such people owning their own land and instruments of production were of necessity free, economically and socially, whatever political disabilities there may have been. Men and women then enjoyed themselves, in a rough and rude fashion perhaps, but nevertheless enjoyed themselves because the future

held few terrors for them in the way of starvation and want of employment.

The Artisans and Craftsmen of the Middle Ages had their economic freedom secured by their individual control of their tools of labor, so the workers of today must possess collectively the great means of production. This in short is the great economic truth which underlies the Labor Celebrations throughout the world. With the development of the industrial forces and the rise of the commercial and trading classes which commenced about the Tudor period, the great and terrible change for the workers began.

Into the various stages through which the artisans and laborers passed from free craftsmen to modern wage-slaves it is impossible to enter in an article of this description. Time began to be much too precious to be wasted on enjoyment, and moreover, when time for holiday-making means poverty, enjoyment is necessarily absent. The Puritans rigorously suppressed all May Day revels, on the ground of their being ungodly things, but in reality their suppression succeeded because the necessities of the growing capitalist form of production for the ever expanding markets rendered it imperative that there should be as few as possible of these stoppages in the manufacture of goods, which the numerous holidays of older times would have caused. The celebrated Maypole, to which I have referred, was destroyed in a fit of Puritanism in the third year of Edward VI's reign, after a sermon preached at the St. Paul's Cross against May games.

The inhabitants of the parish "sawed it to pieces, every man taking for his share as much as had layne over his door and stall, the length of his house and they of the alley divided amongst them so much as had layne over their alley gate."

Of the evils of capitalism during the nineteenth century it is unnecessary for me to write. The inhuman brutality of the capitalist class during their mad rush for wealth is disclosed in the reports of the times. Men, women and children were literally used up to make fortunes for the factory lords—eaten as though they were bread.

May Day and other holidays disappeared. Even Sunday was thought a fitting time for children to clean the machinery. The brutal and unrestricted exploitation of the workers threatened to ruin the whole population of Britain. Fortunately the noblest spirits in the kingdom began to revolt against the horrible conditions which existed, and factory legislation together with the organization of the workers did some little in the direction of raising the standard of life for the workers. The master class also wanted educated wage-slaves.

We have now seen the significance of the old May Day revels. What is the meaning of its revival?

May Day in its modern sense as Labor Day as it is now universally called, dates from 1889. One of the two great International Socialist and Workers Congresses, held in Paris in that year—the year of the French Exhibition—the following resolution was passed: "A great international demonstration shall be organized on fixed date in order that in all countries and in every town on the same day the workers shall demand the legal reduction of the working day to eight hours, and the application of other resolutions passed by the International Congress. Further, seeing that a similar demonstration has already been decided upon for the First of May by the American Federation of Labor, at its Congress of 1888 at St. Louis, this date shall be adopted for the international demonstration. The workers of the various nations shall carry out these demonstrations under whatever conditions may be imposed by the special situation of their respective countries."

On next May Day, that of 1890, the effects of the decision of the International Congress began to be felt. In Belgium the demand for a legal eight hour day was vigorously taken up by the miners. May Day celebrations were held in the principal large towns, such as Brussels, Liege, Charleroi, Antwerp and Namur. In Denmark the workers began to organize for the first of May celebrations, but open air processions were prohibited by the Danish government before the day arrived. In Austria great military preparations were made to meet all emergencies. In Germany many meetings were suppressed and the military were confined to barracks. But it was in France that the most vigorous measures were taken for putting down manifestations. On May 1st M. Constans, then Minister of the Interior, suppressed everything except meetings in private halls. In short,

the terror stricken manner in which the governing class through Europe treated these perfectly legitimate demonstrations on the part of the workers was nothing less than a pitiful exhibition of fear at the sentiment of the international fraternity of the people which lay at the back of the May Day celebrations.

In London there was a great demonstration held in Hyde Park on the first Sunday in May. In the following year 1891, the London Trades Council and the Legal Eight Hours League held a conjoint demonstration on the first Sunday in May.

In the August of the same year at the Brussels International Congress, interesting reports were given in on the Socialist and Labor movements in the various countries. In these reports mention was made of the success of the First of May demonstrations. In addition to the countries we have already given, the reports showed that International gatherings had taken place in Portland, Norway, Roumania, Hungary and even in the Argentine Republic, were meetings had been held at Buenos Ayres, La Plata, Santa Fe, and other of the larger towns.

The 1892 demonstrations reached an importance far beyond that of 1890 or 1891. The First of May fell on a Sunday and consequently the gatherings were immense. The day was looked forward to with anxiety throughout Europe. In most of the continental capitals the military were held in readiness to shoot or bayonet the people at a moment's notice. The authorities were everywhere pretty well scared out of their wits. It was in fact the nearest approach to 1948 that had occurred since that memorable year.

In France, Germany, Belgium, Austria, Holland, Italy, Roumania, Spain, Switzerland, the United States and the old country in fact, in every capitalist nation on the planet, the workers assembled on May 1st, to declare fraternity with their fellows throughout the world.

These demonstrations have been growing yearly in popularity and are an indication that the end of capitalism is near at hand. May Day is the rallying day of the workers of the world. They are slowly being welded together by one common interest. May Day is a sure indication that the solidarity of the toiling and enduring millions is becoming a fact. When once united their chains disappear for ever! Let these International May Day celebrations rouse the workers of the Dominion to class consciousness. Let them understand that the class interests of the workers of every nation are identical, and that those class interests are and must necessarily be antagonistic to those of the capitalist class. Labor day shows that our class is perceiving this more and more every year.

Cheer, comrades—cheer! Our victory is nigh. We can hear the steady march of millions and the growing tramping of their feet is music in our ears. We feel, after toiling and waiting so long, on May Day that we are really and truly part of the world's proletariat. We stretch our hands to our fellows abroad in international amity and concord, confident in the future, determined to devote our lives to the work of the emancipation of our class the world over and resolved to band on to the generations who come after, a brighter and happier social state than that under which we now toil and suffer.

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War is considered a good thing by many exploiters. They consider the present state of society to be a stable one. When machines throw hundreds out of work and they clamor to be fed, the capitalists are at a loss what to do. To feed them without requiring work in return would make the employed slaves discontented. It would endanger capitalist robbery. So the unemployed must be set to work doing something. They are put into the army and are trained to shoot men. This is a fine solution from the capitalist point of view. It furnishes an excuse to the capitalists to keep the unemployed busy. It furnishes a body of legalized murderers to fire at strikers and to keep the wage slaves in slavery. And finally a war can be engineered and thousands of these creatures can be killed off by one another in a legalized manner. The army is fine for the exploiters. For the workers it is an instrument of hell. For these reasons Laurier, Borden, and the capitalists are strengthening the army and making the laws governing soldiers more tyrannical and brutal.

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# LABOR'S HOLIDAY

GERALD DESMOND.

Rise from your sleep, my comrade  
toilers,  
Casting your fears away;  
Showing your strength to the quaking  
spoilers,  
Is this not Labor day?  
Hang out the flags so the world may  
see them;  
Emblems of brotherhood,  
Workers enslaved, we have sworn to  
free them;  
We be of common blood.

Workers of every race and nation,  
Hark to our marching feet.  
Circling the world with our celebration,  
Gathering on square and street.  
Not as of old when, with wistful long-  
ing,  
We bowed round the despot's throne;  
Now in the might of our numbers  
thronging,  
Boldly we claim our own.

Surely today is a promise glorious  
Showing the time is near  
When, in the last hard fight victori-  
ous,  
Labor's day shall be all the year!  
When from the depths of the gloomy  
prison  
Claiming the world in fee,  
Labor shall spring like a God new-  
risen,  
Spite of their tyranny.

Blind we have been but the spell is  
ending,  
See how we break each chain,  
Myriad voices in the war cry blend-  
ing—  
"Nought to lose and a world to  
gain!"  
Onward the ranks, then, firm, un-  
faltering,  
Banish each doubt and fear;  
Onward the ranks then, the foes are  
faltering,  
Victory hovereth near!

Now comes the report that Porcupine, Ont., is overcrowded with unemployed workers. Reports of big wages caused the unemployed to flood Porcupine. Capitalism puts the means of production into private hands and these can shut out workers and prevent them producing wealth for themselves. So the unemployed drift from town to town and the masters are pleased. If workers are scarce in any community an obedient capitalist press will print startling headlines about huge wages and the unemployed will flow to get a chance to work. The unemployed do not get the chance to work but the workers on the job are forced to work for wages that will bring in but a bare living. That is the function of the unemployed—to keep the employed working for a bare living wage. Why do not all the workers unite, seize the government and call all the workers to work to produce wealth to be consumed by the working class?

In a recent editorial the Montreal Witness declares, "They know that they, the working classes, really have the power when they choose to use it, and some day they mean to apply it. It will be ludicrous as well as tragic for the privileged classes to shriek Socialism and confiscation then. They will have deliberately brought the debacle on themselves, and will be able to do nothing but squirm as 'Labor' writes its ideals in the Statute Book." The Witness has been following events closely and realizes where we are tending. The masters of finance and industry will be forced to yield up their power and control to the common working men of Canada. Then will the workers be free for they will govern themselves and will be able to give their wives and children comfort and leisure.

A political crisis is again near in France is the report in the capitalist press. The same press reports that the General Confederation of Labor is utterly discredited because it advocates the general strike. The capitalists alternate between hope and fear and their newspapers reflect their feelings of the moment. But as time goes on the knowledge of their extinction as a privileged class becomes more and more apparent to the world at large.

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When the eight-hour-day bill reached the Senate of Canada Senator McMullen declared that "The people must be plainly told that such legislation is contrary to the best interests of the country and will not be tolerated." Senator Power declared that the work of the carpenter, mason and bricklayer was practically only healthy exercise, and the demands of health did not require any eight hour day. That is the kind of talk the doddering old Senators mumble forth. The Senate is first, last and all the time against labor and in favor of capital. That is why the capitalists of Canada pay the Senators \$2500 a year each. The Senate ought to be abolished and the Senators placed in a home for the feeble minded.

While the Mayor of Montreal was in Quebec, he gave a little dinner party at the Chateau Frontenac which cost the city of Montreal \$158. Mayor Guerin draws \$10,000 a year for being Mayor. Money comes easy to him. While the little bill of \$158 was being presented to the city for Guerin's little supper a twenty-year old Montreal boy committed suicide. "Good-bye, mother, I will never see you again," was the message he wrote as he lay dying from a dose of carbolic acid. The boy, J. C. Hanon, had been out of work for two months. A suicide's grave for the unemployed worker. A \$158 supper for Mayor Guerin. Just think it over.

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