



# HISTORY OF LABOUR DAY



**Kerala Institute of  
Labour and Employment (KILE)**

# History of Māy Day

## Published by

Kerala Institute of Labour Employment (KILE)

4th Floor, Labour Complex, Vikas Bhavan P.O, Thiruvananthapuram - 695033

Phone : 0471 2309012, 2307742, 2308947 (Fax)

E-mail : [kiletvm@gmail.com](mailto:kiletvm@gmail.com)

Web: [www.kile.kerala.gov.in](http://www.kile.kerala.gov.in)

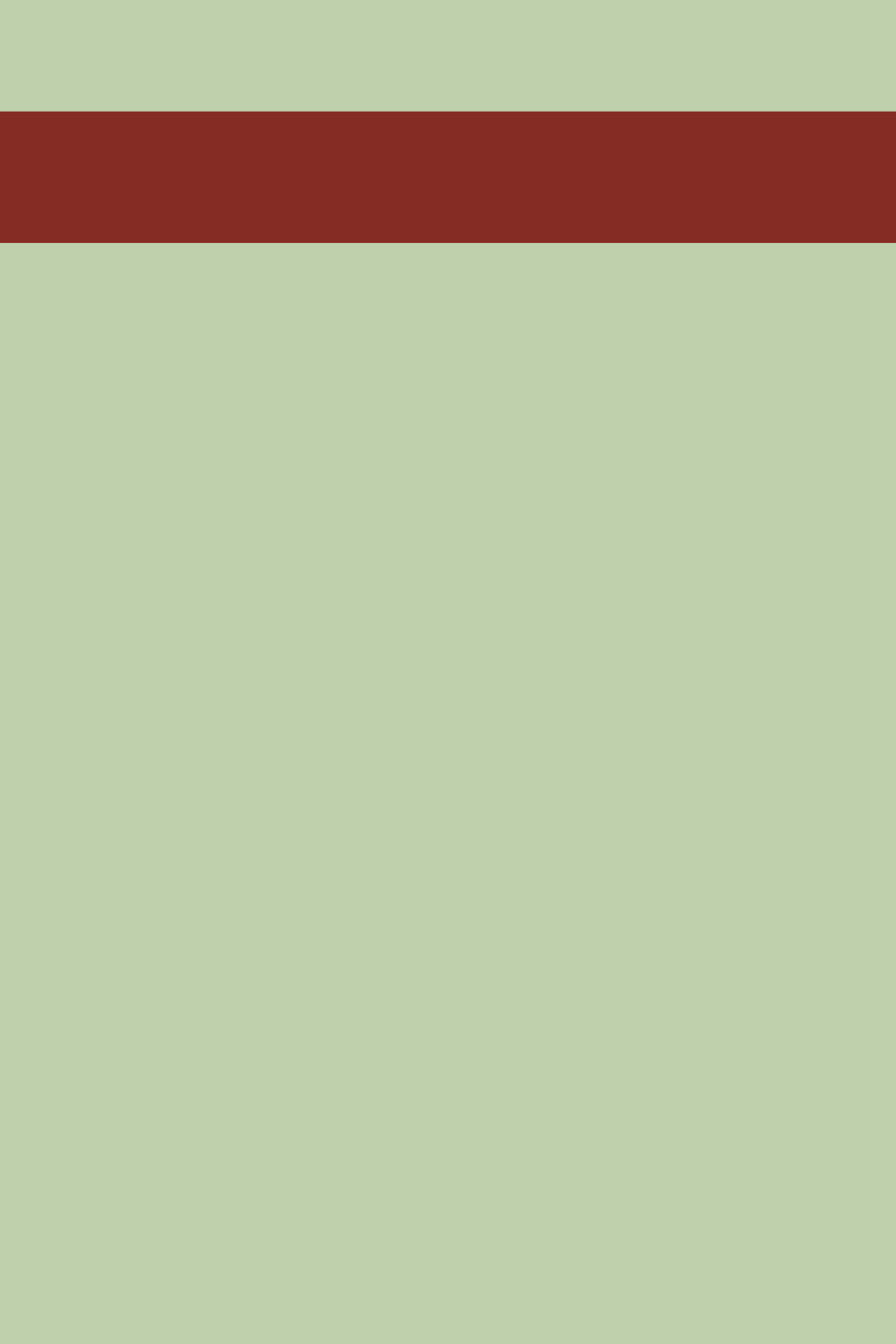
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 THIS THAT #9961350555

Layout : Anil Gopal 9061 350 555

# THE HISTORY OF MAY DAY







# THE HISTORY OF MAY DAY AND WORKERS' RIGHTS



Originally the day was a pagan celebration of the return of summer. Persecution of May Day began in the 17th century when European rulers backed by the churches attempted to ban the celebrations as being immoral. However many of the traditions continued as the European peasantry had stronger ties to each other and to nature than they had to their rulers and the churches.

In the nineteenth century as the industrial

revolution spread around the world, men, women and children endured very long working days, often twelve hours or more. The idea of having a workers' holiday celebration was born in Australia. In 1856 Australian workers organised a day of complete stoppage of work together with speeches and entertainment as a demonstration in favour of an eight hour working day.

Thirty years on in the United States on 3rd May



1886, Chicago police opened fire on unarmed strikers, killing 6 and wounding many more. The following day Chicago workers gathered in Haymarket Square to demonstrate against continuing police brutality. As the police attempted to clear the square, a bomb exploded, killing 7 policemen.

In a show trial 8 anarchist leaders were convicted of murder even although only one of them was present at the time of the blast and he was addressing the crowd. Four of the leaders were executed, one took his own life in prison; 3 others were later pardoned.

The executed Chicago trade unionists became known as the Haymarket Martyrs. Outrage

at the killings spread around the world. In 1889 an international gathering of socialists and communists (the Second International) decided to commemorate the Haymarket Martyrs by organ-

ising mass demonstrations throughout Europe and America. From 1890 onwards workers throughout the world have adopted May Day as a day of International Workers Solidarity, fighting for the right to celebrate their past and to build a future free from oppression and exploitation.

The campaign for an eight-hour working day was at the heart of the early May Day protests. It was a time when unorganised workers were joining unions and combining in collective struggle for workers' rights. Eleanor Marx was deeply involved in unionising women workers and played a key role in organising the first May day rally

in London. It proved impossible to get agreement on a single rally and she worried that numbers would be low.

In the event 3000 marched on May 1st and a quarter of a million rallied to Hyde Park 3 days later!

May Day rallies took off strongly in Scotland. In 1891 between eight and ten thousand rallied at Glasgow Green. Glasgow Socialist Harry McShane writing in the early years of the twentieth century observed how the demonstrations were always very colourful, 'everyone wore red ties and red sashes'. McShane also noted that women were always prominent in the May Day demonstrations – they seemed to have less hesitation about wearing their colours – and when the real street movements grew up they were very active. In the 1915 rent strike and the unemployed movements of the twenties and thirties, women showed just how much they could do.

As well as campaigning for workers' rights there has always been a strong tradition of international solidarity on May Day. At the Glasgow Rally in 1915 speeches were made in Russian, Yiddish, Lithuanian and Polish – red bow ties were sold to raise funds to help political prisoners in Russia.

Today the tradition of May Day continues. Battles over workers' rights, women's rights and human rights more generally remain just as relevant today – in Scotland and around the world.

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### Reference

**Picture:** Romanian National Archives - Fototeca online a comunismului românesc, photo #G005,

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Contributed by the Edinburgh & Lothians May Day Committee, with support from the Educational Institute of Scotland.

# THE HAYMARKET AFFAIR



**T**he Haymarket affair, also known as the Haymarket massacre, the Haymarket riot, the Haymarket Square riot, or the Haymarket Incident, was the aftermath of a bombing that took place at a labor demonstration on May 4, 1886, at Hay-market Square in Chicago, Illinois, United States..

The rally began peacefully in support of workers striking for an eight-hour work day, the day after the events at the McCormick Harvesting Machine Company, during which one person was

killed and many workers injured.[3] An unknown person threw a dynamite bomb at the police as they acted to disperse the meeting, and the bomb blast and ensuing retaliatory gunfire by the police caused the deaths of seven police officers and at least four civilians; dozens of others were wounded.

Eight anarchists were charged with the bombing. In the internationally publicized legal proceedings against the accused, the eight were convicted of conspiracy. The Haymarket affair is generally considered significant as the origin of

International Workers' Day held on May 1, and it was also the climax of the social unrest among the working class in America known as the Great Upheaval. The evidence put forward in the court trial was that one of the defendants may have built the bomb, but none of those on trial had thrown it, and only two of the eight were at the Haymarket at the time. Seven were sentenced to death and one to a term of 15 years in prison. Illinois Governor Richard J. Oglesby commuted two of the sentences to terms of life in prison; another died by suicide in

jail before his scheduled execution. The other four were hanged on November 11, 1887. In 1893, Illinois Governor John Peter Altgeld pardoned the remaining defendant and criticized the trial. The site of the incident was designated a Chicago landmark in 1992, and a sculpture was dedicated there in 2004. In addition, the Haymarket Martyrs' Monument was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1997 at the defendants' burial site in Forest Park.



# A LOOK BACK TO THE HISTORY OF LABOURS DAY

In the mid-1890s, Samuel Gompers, the founder of the American Federation of Labor, noted that "Labor Day differs in every essential way from the other holidays of the year in any country. All other holidays are in a more or less degree connected with conflicts



and battles of man's prowess over man, of strife and discord for greed and power..... Labor Day is devoted to no man, living or dead, to no sect, race, or nation".

At that time, the only widely accepted days off for workers – other than Sundays – were Christmas, New Year's Day, and Thanksgiving. Workers received no pay for those holidays, but with so many willing to take "LWOP," employers were unable to run their businesses and simply shut down.

## **Taking the Day Off**

In order to make a basic living, the average American worker in the late 19th Century labored 12-hour





days, six days a week. Sundays were recognized as a day of rest, but there were no laws limiting the number of hours tives for employers to offer time off.

One of the major goals of the organizations that made up the fledgling labor movement was to win a restriction on the hours of work. The first inroads were made by skilled employees who convinced their bosses that getting off early on Saturday would mean a much fresher start the following Monday. (It was the institu-tion of the shorter workday on Satur-day that ultimately led to the five-day week, as well as the concept of the weekend.)

New York City was home to the first Labor Day celebration, on Sept. 5, 1882. Planners wanted to call attention to abusive employer practices, such as child labor, and were seeking laws to promote the idea of a 10-hour workday.

The Central Labor Union (CLU) organized more than 10,000 workers in a march from City Hall,

near Wall Street, to Union Square, two miles uptown. The purpose of the parade was to exhibit to the public "the strength and esprit de corps of the trade and labor organizations!" It was followed by a street festival for the workers — most of whom were on unauthorized leave and risked being fired — and their families.

The parade was a success and a similar event was held the following year. In 1884, the CLU urged labor federations in other cities to join in the "workingman's holiday" on the first Monday each September. By 1885, "Labor Parades" were being staged in a number of industrial centers across the U.S., and municipal ordinances recognizing the holiday emboldened workers to take part.

### **State Sanctioned**

Although the first bill recognizing the holiday was introduced in New York, the



first statewide Labor Day law was passed by the Oregon legislature on Feb. 21, 1887. By the end of the 1880s, nearly 30 states had followed suit.

Many of the celebrations featured speeches and demonstrations calling for a "national" holiday, with these calls for federal recognition becoming more vocal each year. But it took a labor debacle to prompt the establishment of a federal day in labor's honor.

The American Railway Union, a single organization that represented all crafts of railroad employees, was

formed in March 1893. That August, the Chicago-based Great Northern Railroad made the first of three rounds of wage cuts. After the third pay cut, in March 1894, ARU members voted to strike, and shut down the rail line for 18 days, until wages were restored.

Thousands of railway workers soon had joined the ARU, including a large number of Pullman Palace Car manufacturing employees. In May 1894, after wage cuts at the Chicago plant, the Pullman local went on strike and the ARU voted to refuse to work any trains that included the company's cars.

The railroad companies responded by attaching Pullman cars to U.S. Mail trains. Once the boycott was shown to be delaying the mail, a court ordered ARU members back to work. When the judicial directive was ignored, President Grover Cleveland sent in federal troops and famously said: "If it takes the entire army



and navy of the United States to deliver a postal card in Chicago, that card will be delivered!

After nearly two months of sporadic incidents of arson and looting, while soldiers helped

parade of 1882 and was set for the first Monday in September. But the selection of September for the observance of Labor Day may have had more to do with a desire to avoid having it coincide with May Day.



move the mail, the strike collapsed. In the aftermath, labor leaders were sent to prison, the railway union was disbanded, and Pullman employees were forced to pledge that they never again would unionize. Despite the disastrous outcome of the strike, Cleveland was prevailed upon to sign a "Labor Day" bill that Congress had approved at the height of the unrest.

The bill was worded to honor the original Labor Day

### **That Day in May**

In some places, May Day is a light-hearted celebration of spring. But in many countries, "Internati-onal Workers Day" is a national holiday originally associated with political protests and street rallies. Although some were organized by workers and their trade unions, anarchists and socialists often played a strong role.

It was at a gathering of socialists in Paris in 1889 that May Day was established, as a commemoration of the "Haymarket" incident in Chicago in early May of 1886. Four strikers had been killed at a manufacturing plant following a citywide protest in support of the eight-hour day, and a rally at Haymarket Square was planned to honor the victims. Organized largely by anarchists, it culminated in an explosion that killed a policeman and led to a riot during which at least a dozen police officers and demonstrators were killed by gunfire.

In communist countries such as the People's Republic of China, Cuba, and offshoots of the former Soviet Union, May Day is purportedly a salute to workers. But it typically is overshadowed by elaborate military parades.

### **Out of the Depression**

In the U.S., the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) of 1938 is considered the "main

pay law of the land," because it regulates minimum wage and overtime pay at the federal level. But the FLSA does not require holiday pay or time-off. However, with all levels of government routinely closing public offices on "legal holidays," public-sector employees began to receive full wages for the time off. And many private-sector employers began to follow a tradition of paying their employees for those same days. Yet even today there is no law that requires private-sector employers to give their workers a day's pay for staying home on a federal holiday.

There is, however, a day to honor the efforts of those who worked toward to create holidays, as well as all other types of paid leave. And though Labor Day is meant as a celebration of the labor movement and its many achievements, the "holiday" that set the pattern for all three-day weekends to follow is now celebrated mainly as a long work-break that officially closes out the summer.

# WHY DO WE NEED INTERNATIONAL WORKERS' DAY?

International Workers' Day is a celebration of working people and a day when people campaign for decent work and fair pay. Thanks to action taken by workers over many years, millions of people have won fundamental rights and protections. Minimum wages have been established, there are limits on working hours, and people have the right to paid holidays and sick pay.

However, in recent years, working conditions in many

situations have got worse. Since the global financial crisis of 2008, part-time, short-term and badly paid work has become more common, and state pensions are at risk. We have also seen the rise of the 'gig economy', where companies hire workers casually for one short job at a time. These workers don't have the usual rights to paid holidays, the minimum wage or redundancy pay. Solidarity with other workers is as important as ever.



# HOW IS WORKERS' DAY CELEBRATED NOW?

Celebrations and protests take place in different ways in different countries around the world. May 1 is a public holiday in countries such as South Africa, Tunisia, Tanzania, Zimbabwe and China. In many countries, including France, Greece, Japan, Pakistan, the United Kingdom and the United States, there are demon-

strations on International Workers' Day.

Workers' Day is a day for working people to have a rest from their usual labour. It is an opportunity to campaign for workers' rights, show solidarity with other working people and to celebrate the achievements of workers all over the world.



# THE FIRST MAY DAY IN INDIA

**O**n 1 May 1923, Singaravelar founded the Labour Kishan Party of Hindusthan (party of workers and peasants) in Madras. The foundation ceremony was purposefully kept on the May Day; and for the first time in India, under the auspices of the newly formed party, the day was observed as International Workers' Day. On that occasion, again for the first time the red flag was used in India. Singaravelar made arrangements to celebrate the May Day in two places in the beach opposite to the Madras High Court; the other was held at the Triplicane beach. The Hindu newspaper, published from Madras reported, The Labour Kisan party has introduced May Day celebrations in Chennai. Comrade Singaravelar presided over the meeting. A resolution was passed stating that the government should declare May Day as a holiday. The president of the party explained the non-violent principles of the party. There was a request for financial aid. It was emphasised that workers of the world must unite to achieve independence.

One meeting was held at the



# LABOUR KISAN PARTY OF HINDUSTAN



Labour Kisan Party of Hindustan was a political party in India. The party was founded by Singaravelu Chettiar on 1 May 1923 in Madras. This was the first May Day celebration in India.

This was also the first time the red flag was used in India. Chettiar made arrangements to celebrate May Day in two places in 1923. One meeting was held at the beach opposite to the Madras High Court; the other meeting was held at the

Triplicane beach. The Hindu newspaper reported.

Chettiar announced that it would join the Indian National Congress and would strive to function as the labour and farmer wing of that party. In the manifesto of the party Chettiar described Congress 'our chief political organ, appear to define "nation" by referring to propertied class'. Singaravelu was critical that the Indian National Congress was dominated by landlord and capitalist interests.



Labour Kishan Party of Hindustan was a part of a larger, but not inter-connected, move by various Indian communist groups to find a mass-based political platform. The party was joined by S.A. Dange and the communist group in Punjab. Dange had initially expressed reservations on the LKPH and its programme drafted by Chettiar, but once the party had been formed he joined it.

In December 1923, Chettiar started a fortnightly journal called The Labour Kisan Gazette. Chettiar also started the Tamil Weekly Thozhilalar in which he wrote about the working class movements spreading in various parts of the world during the early part of the 1920s.

Singaravelu announced the dissolution of the party at the 1925 Kanpur conference of the Communist Party of India.



# MALAYAPURAM SINGARAVELU



Malayapuram Singaravelu (18 February 1860 – 11 February 1946), also known as M. Singaravelu and Singaravelar, was a pioneer in more than one field in India. In 1918, he founded the first trade union in India. On 1 May 1923 he organised the first ever celebration of May Day in the country. Singaravelar was a major leader of the Indian independence movement, initially under the leadership of Gandhi, but later, joining the budding communist movement. In 1925, he became one of the founding fathers of the

Communist Party of India; and chaired its inaugural convention in Kanpur. Though the British Government arrested him along with other leaders on charges of conspiring to wage war against the Crown, he was set free, soon after, on account of his failing health. Singaravelar was also a path-breaking social reformer who in his early life took to Buddhism, seeing it as a weapon against the evil of untouchability, which was particularly severe in the 19th-century India. He was also in the forefront of Self respect movement, in the Madras Presidency that fought for equal rights for backward castes. Though in his advanced years, he withdrew from active politics, Singaravelar remained a staunch advocate of the causes he had pioneered till his death at the age of 85.







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