

April 29, 2022

## May Day – International Workers’ Day

The first day of May is recognized around the world as International Workers’ Day, or May Day. It’s a day where workers come together to honour the collective fight that won the eight-hour workday and the continued struggle for workers to be treated fairly and with respect.

For more than a century, International Workers’ Day has acknowledged and celebrated the many achievements of the trade union movement, including unions’ legal right to exist and organize, minimum employment standards, occupational health and safety legislation, pensions, and social welfare systems.

We’ve had serious setbacks too. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the devastating consequences of cuts, neglect, and privatization of public services. Business giants line their pockets while workers struggle to pay their bills and keep a roof over their heads. While for-profit health care destroys lives, and the most vulnerable members suffer and fall through the cracks of ravaged social support systems.

### History of May Day

In May 1886, 400,000 workers in many parts of the United States went on strike, demanding an eight-hour working day. The strike started peacefully, but on the third day of demonstrations, police in Chicago shot at unarmed workers, killing several of them. The next day, someone threw a bomb into the crowd and police started shooting. In the end, seven police officers and four workers were dead. The person who threw the bomb was never identified, but eight workers were arrested. Seven of them were sentenced to death, and one of them was sent to prison for 15 years.

This event, known as The Haymarket Affair, was very important in bringing working people together in the U.S. Many people didn't believe the men were guilty, and the trial was criticized for being unfair. The Haymarket Affair became an international symbol of the struggle for workers' rights, and, in 1889, May 1 was chosen to be International Workers' Day.

The first known International Workers’ Day event in Canada took place in Montreal in 1906. Almost 1,000 people took to the streets under the banner “Workers of the world, unite.” The May Day parade became a yearly event.


The importance of May Day celebrations increased during the Great Depression and economic crisis that followed and demands at the time ranged from free milk for children to employment insurance and laws against evictions.

At the end of the Second World War, and the beginning of the Cold War, anti-communist sentiment hampered May Day events. But they made a comeback in the 1970s, and have gained in significance during decades of neoliberalism, as public services have been cut, privatized, and decimated, as salaries stagnate while the cost-of-living rises, and as workers continue to fight for decent work, fair wages, respect, and dignity.

### The Struggle Continues

We are all part of a global movement that is demanding safe workplaces, living wages with sick days and benefits, and quality public services for all. No matter where we come from, what we look like, or what we do, we all deserve dignity and respect.

We encourage all CUPW members to take part in May Day events and activities in your area. Demonstrations, protests, and other events are being held across the country. We invite you to check with your local federation of labour or labour councils to find an event near you.



Julee Sanderson  
1<sup>st</sup> National Vice-President

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//dn cope 225