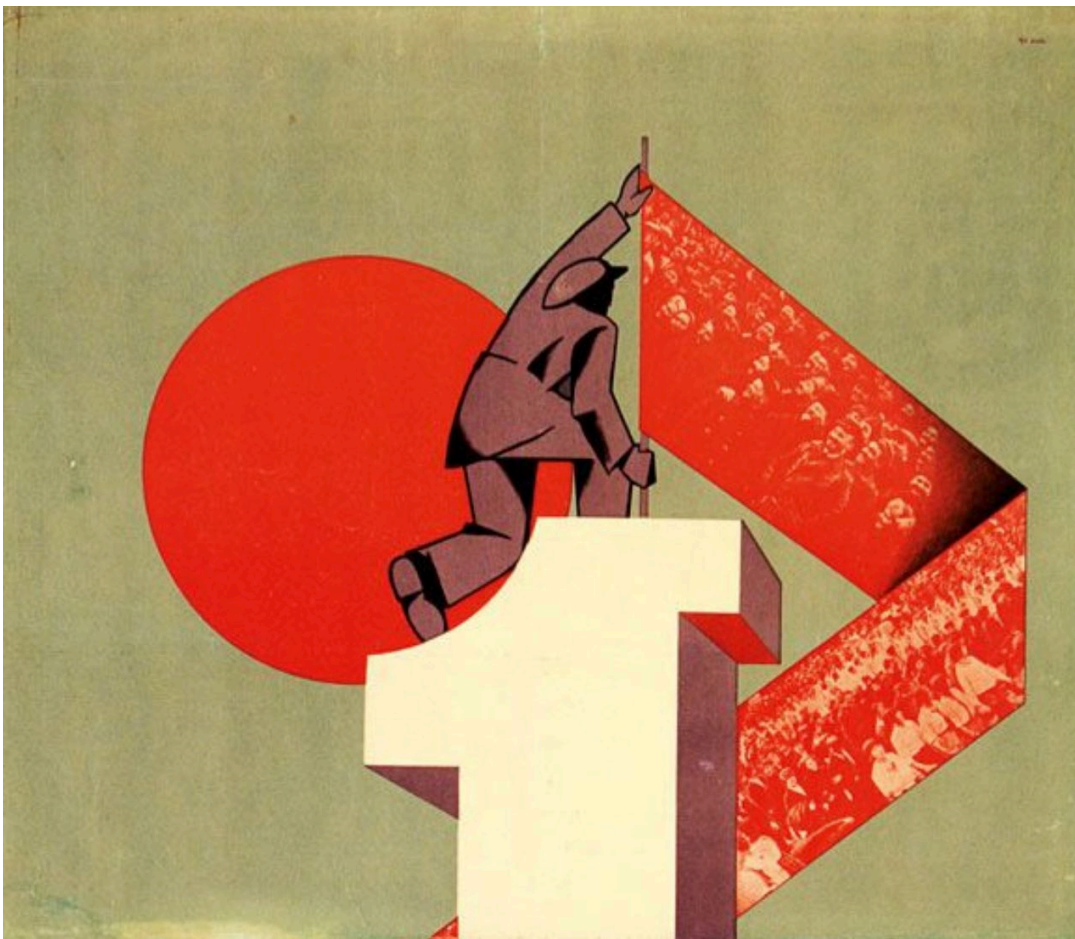


The Cause: Eric Hobsbawm on the History of May Day



Hobsbawm's History of May Day



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ERIC HOBBSBAWMI. My present subject is perhaps the only unquestionable dent made by a secular movement in the Christian or any other official calendar, a holiday established not in one or two countries, but in 1990 officially in 107 states. What is more, it is an occasion established not by the power of governments or conquerors, but by an entirely unofficial movement of poor men and women. I am speaking of May Day, or more precisely of the First of May, the international festival of the working-class movement.

The extraordinary thing about the evolution of this institution is that it was unintended and unplanned. To this extent it was not so much an 'invented tradition' as a suddenly erupting one. The immediate origin of May Day is not in dispute. It was a resolution passed by one of the two rival founding congresses of the International – the Marxist one – in Paris in July 1889, centenary year of the French Revolution. This called for an international demonstration by workers on the same day, when they would put the demand for a legal eight hour day to their respective public and other authorities. And since the American Federation of Labor had already decided to hold such a demonstration on 1 May 1890, this day was to be chosen for the international demonstration.

May Day came from below. It was shaped by anonymous working people themselves who, through it, recognised themselves, across lines of occupation, language, even nationality as a single class by deciding, once a year, deliberately not to work: to flout the moral, political and economic compulsion to labour. As Victor Adler put it in 1893: "This is the sense of the May holiday, of the rest from work, which our adversaries fear. This is what they feel to be revolutionary."

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In the latest bulletin of *The Cause*, Norwegian trade unionist Asbjørn Wahl writes about how class struggle built the welfare state:

"The welfare state, in its different versions, has been celebrated as one of the greatest achievements of the labour movement in Western Europe. And it's no surprise: the welfare state represented great progress in people's general living and working conditions. Health, life expectancy, and social security developed enormously in a relatively short period as the welfare state emerged during the twentieth century.

Let's be clear: the quality and level of welfare services is a question of economic, social, and political power. The emergence of the trade union movement, in alliance with other popular movements, and their struggle over decades against capital and business interests, created new power relations through market regulations, public ownership, and democratic control of basic infrastructure. This gave us universal, high-quality social protection and public services.

The power of capital was reduced in favour of politically-elected bodies. Competition was dampened through political interventions in the market. Capital controls were installed, and financial capital came under significant regulation. This made it possible for governments to pursue a policy of national and social development without continuously being confronted by capital's blackmail, wherein big corporations threatened to move to other countries with more favourable conditions if their interests were hurt."

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Here's the latest...

The largest demonstration of the first ever May Day in 1890 was held in Hyde Park, London, where 300,000 people gathered to demand an eight-hour day. Socialist writer Edward Aveling [recalls the occasion](#).

"As long as the struggle of the workers against the ruling class continues, May Day will be the yearly expression of our demands." [Rosa Luxemburg writes](#) on the meaning of International Workers' Day.

Recent decades have seen a [decline in trade union membership](#), with workers' conditions deteriorating as a result. The need for the labour movement hasn't diminished – but to rebuild it, we need to be brave.

Since the 1800s, the upward march of the organised labour movement has [transformed the world of work](#) – reducing hours, improving conditions and winning new rights for millions of working people.

In the [latest episode of A World to Win podcast](#), Grace Blakeley speaks to Harsha Walia about the role of borders in capitalism and imperialism.