

International May Day 2017: Mass marches and police repression

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May Day, the day of the international working class, saw mass marches and protests on every continent, as well as scattered strikes, as workers sought to demonstrate their opposition to the policies of right-wing governments and their solidarity with their class brothers and sisters around the world.

In country after country, workers raised the same issues—low wages, the growth of “contingent” labor, the slashing of benefits and pensions—underscoring the common struggles confronting the working class internationally. Governments around the world are imposing ever more vicious austerity measures in response to the global crisis of the capitalist system, while diverting greater and greater resources into military spending and war preparations.

The day’s events demonstrated that the objective conditions produced by the development of global production have created the basis for the unification of the working class as an international class. But workers are held in enforced disunity by the nationally-based trade unions and “labor” parties that serve as the direct instruments of big business in every country.

In several countries, protests on the traditional holiday of the world working class were met with violent provocations on the part of the authorities. In Turkey, police fired tear gas and rubber bullets at demonstrators in Istanbul, the country’s largest city, and arrested at least 200 people. Most were arrested during the protests, but some were detained in raids later that night. Political tensions have been rising in the wake of the April 16 referendum, narrowly won by the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), which gives Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan virtually dictatorial powers.

In Germany, some 10,000 people assembled for a May Day street festival in the Kreuzberg district of

Berlin. They were met by what even bourgeois press reports described as an “astonishing 5,400 police officers,” deployed on the pretext of preventing violence.

In France, police used tear gas and truncheons, pushing demonstrators against a wall and clubbing them. Socialist Party Interior Minister Matthias Fekl denounced “intolerable violence,” condemning the victims of the police brutality, not the cops who inflicted it.

There were large demonstrations in a number of European cities: 10,000 in Athens, half that number in Thessaloniki, Greece’s second-largest city, as well as a 24-hour strike called by several unions. Other marches took place in Britain, Italy, Spain, Belgium, Poland and elsewhere across the continent.

In South Africa, President Jacob Zuma was forced to cancel his May Day speech after workers began jeering him and calling for his resignation.

Thousands of garment workers in Bangladesh gathered to demand wage increases as well as better housing and health benefits and provision for the education of their children. Workers in that country are paid wages far lower than in China or Southeast Asia, and many of the leading European and American clothing retailers now source their production through Bangladesh, whose garment workforce has swelled to four million.

In Cambodia, a thousand garment workers defied a government order and delivered a petition demanding a higher minimum wage and broader democratic rights. In Indonesia, some 10,000 workers marched on the presidential palace in Jakarta to demand a rise in the minimum wage, limits on outsourcing and improved health care and working conditions.

Thousands of Taiwanese workers marched in the

capital, Taipei, against low wages, poor working conditions and the elimination of basic pension provisions. Korean workers marched in Seoul, focusing their demands on a reduction in the use of temporary workers and “independent contractors” to evade paying legally required wages and benefits.

In the Western Hemisphere, there were rival pro- and anti-government demonstrations in Venezuela, where right-wing US-backed parties are seeking to take control of popular opposition to the bourgeois government of President Nicholas Maduro, who succeeded the late Hugo Chavez.

Puerto Rico was virtually shut down by a May Day strike against austerity measures imposed by the government of Governor Ricardo Rosselló. Demonstrators blocked roads to enforce a general strike while denouncing the US financial control board overseeing the Rosselló administration. Police fired tear gas and smoke bombs and used pepper spray.

In the United States, May Day is not observed as a workers’ holiday. Instead, the first Monday in September was designated as “Labor Day” more than a century ago in order to separate American workers from socialistic movements overseas.

But there were widespread protests nonetheless, with thousands turning out in every major city in demonstrations to defend immigrant workers and oppose the Trump administration’s attacks on Hispanics, Muslims and other immigrants.

By far the largest demonstration took place in Los Angeles, where tens of thousands assembled outside of City Hall. In keeping with the completely conservative character of the official labor movement, the platform at the rally was handed over to capitalist politicians, headed by Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti, a Democrat who denounced the anti-immigrant policies of the Trump administration while saying nothing about the reactionary policies of the Obama administration, which deported more undocumented workers than any previous US government.

A handful of right-wing pro-Trump demonstrators faced off across a street corner, chanting “USA! USA!” while Los Angeles police established a line between them and the much larger crowd of pro-immigrant marchers.

Thousands took part in protests in other California cities, including San Francisco, San Jose and Oakland,

where the docks were shut down by a longshoremen’s walkout in solidarity with the pro-immigrant demonstrations. There was a very large demonstration in Houston, and marches involving thousands in Chicago, Milwaukee, Philadelphia, New York City, Washington DC and Atlanta. Other cities reporting significant protests included Portland, Seattle, Phoenix, Las Vegas, Indianapolis, Pittsburgh, Miami, Boston and Providence, Rhode Island.

One thousand Philadelphia public school teachers did not report for work, many of them taking personal time to join the immigrant rights march and protest going without a raise or a new contract for nearly five years. Temple University students and professors walked out of many classes at 10 a.m. to demand that the college declare itself a sanctuary campus, barring collaboration with the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency.

Most of the US rallies were addressed by Democratic Party politicians and union officials who sought to focus popular anger exclusively on President Donald Trump, while concealing the anti-immigrant record of Obama. One rally in Chicago was typical, with Dick Durbin, the second-ranking Democrat in the US Senate, hailing as a victory the bipartisan agreement on a bill to fund the federal government through September 30 that does not authorize spending sought by Trump to build a wall along the US-Mexico border.

“Today we are passing a budget bill which says there will be no wall, not one penny for a wall,” Durbin declared. “No expansion for an enforcement force for ICE and others, and no penalties for sanctuary cities. We were able to achieve that in the minority.”

The truth is that the budget bill authorizes \$1.52 billion in beefed-up measures against immigrants, including more Border Patrol officers and the use of drone surveillance against refugees seeking to cross the border.



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