

# US unions' "May Day Strong" seeks to neuter May Day

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There is growing support for socialism in the United States. Workers and youth look at the war in Iran, Trump's deployment of ICE thugs, mass layoffs and spiraling inequality, and conclude that the country is run by gangsters and criminals. They are beginning to recognize that a fundamental transformation is needed.

Inevitably, this growing interest in socialism is contributing to a growing interest in May Day. This year, the *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Committee of the Fourth International's annual online May Day rally "will present a revolutionary perspective to unify workers internationally in the struggle against capitalism, imperialist war, and the global assault on democratic rights. It will outline a program to end the criminal aggression against Iran, oppose the rise of fascism, and build a society based on equality and human need."

The ICFI's May Day rally will emphasize the necessity of a rebellion against the union apparatus and the creation of new organs of struggle, rank-and-file committees, to overthrow the pro-capitalist bureaucracy and transfer control to workers on the shop floor. This is a necessary part of building a global movement uniting the working class in a common struggle against capitalism, against Wall Street, imperialism and fascism.

In an effort to contain the political radicalization of workers and young people, the AFL-CIO bureaucracy is intervening with its own "May Day Strong" campaign. It consists of a series of events throughout the country, ranging from picnics and "labor fairs" to demonstrations in major cities. In Chicago, it has an official character. May 1 has been designated a "day of civic action" in the city's school district, with voluntary participation in rallies, and the events are officially backed by Democratic Mayor Brandon Johnson, a former Chicago Teachers Union official.

That thousands will take part in these demonstrations is a significant milestone in a country where May Day was all but banned from the official calendar, and anticommunism has long functioned as a state religion, including inside the unions.

There is also a profound historical significance to mass participation in Chicago. It was the site of the first May Day in 1886, where a mass demonstration for the eight-hour day ended in the bloody police massacre known as the Haymarket Affair.

May Day, founded on a world basis three years later, is a revolutionary and socialist holiday. Rosa Luxemburg explained its significance in 1913: "The brilliant basic idea of May Day is the autonomous, immediate stepping forward of the proletarian

masses, the political mass action of the millions of workers who otherwise are atomized by the barriers of the state in the day-to-day parliamentary affairs."

But while Luxemburg's words will resonate with the large majority in attendance Friday, the goal of the official speakers and organizers is precisely to reinforce "the barriers of the state." They are attempting to turn the events into platforms for stumping for the Democratic Party.

For well over a century, the American union bureaucracy was overwhelmingly hostile to May Day and largely ignored it, instead observing Labor Day as a nationalist and non-political alternative in the fall. This flowed from the bureaucracy's explicit support for capitalism and its intense anticommunism and "America First" nationalism.

If they are now partly changing their tune, it is because they want to get in front of the growing movement to the left, dilute the radicalization and divert it into harmless channels.

In the weeks leading up to May Day, the union bureaucracy has carried out a series of betrayals, keeping hundreds of thousands of workers off the picket line.

In recent weeks, union officials canceled strikes at the last minute by Los Angeles school workers and New York City doormen, actions that would have involved more than 110,000 workers. The United Auto Workers has defied demands for strike action by 3,000 Columbia University academic workers and 1,300 Nexteer Automotive workers in Saginaw, Michigan.

In Chicago, the CTU last year blocked a strike by 28,000 educators and rammed through a contract, which was followed almost immediately by austerity measures. That same contract recognized May Day, only to provide the bureaucracy with an opportunity to cover for its own actions. The craven collaboration of the CTU left-talkers with the political establishment is an insult to the memory of the Haymarket martyrs.

Earlier this year, with growing demands by workers and young people for a general strike against ICE occupation of Minneapolis, the unions declared strikes were illegal under the terms of the pro-corporate labor agreements they signed. Instead, they diverted opposition into "No work, no school, no shopping" protests, which largely turned out to be consumer boycotts and impotent appeals to Target and other corporations. By doing so, the union apparatus not only stumped for the Democrats but played directly into Trump's hands by suppressing organized resistance from below.

Here, too, there is a bitter historical irony. Minneapolis was the

site of the 1934 general strike, led by Trotskyists in the Teamsters, which marked a turning point in the growth of industrial unionism during the Great Depression. Workers defeated attempts by police and the city's business elite to drown the strike in violence.

While opposing a general strike in 2026, UAW President Shawn Fain is promoting a "general strike" on May Day in 2028, timed to correspond with the Democrats' campaign for president. This was first announced after the sellout contract in 2023, which cost thousands of workers their jobs. It is safely placed in the distant future, allowing the bureaucracy to posture without taking action.

Fain's defenders claim that a general strike now is unrealistic because they "take time" to organize. This is a fraud. The union bureaucracy, tied by a million threads to the corporate and political establishment, has no intention of organizing such a fight. A general strike will only emerge through the development of a movement of rank-and-file workers in every factory and workplace—in a rebellion against the pro-corporate bureaucracy.

As a statement on the *World Socialist Web Site* following the January 23 mass demonstration in Minneapolis said:

The Socialist Equality Party calls for the building of rank-and-file committees in every workplace. Every factory, depot, warehouse, office, school and hospital must become a center of organization and political discussion. Workers should hold emergency meetings, elect delegates, draw up demands and link together across industries and regions.

These committees must coordinate mass action, defend those under attack, and lay the foundations for a general strike, that is, the complete shutdown of economic activity. This cannot be limited to Minneapolis. Trump's conspiracy for dictatorship is national, and the response of the working class must extend across the entire country. Moreover, what is happening in the United States is a concentrated expression of the turn by the ruling class in every country to dictatorship and war.

The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) has been established to provide the structure and leadership for such a global counteroffensive. It fights to connect opposition to fascism and dictatorship with the struggle of the working class against war, job cuts, inflation and social misery.

As for the Democrats, they refuse to take any action to fight Trump because they are terrified that a mass movement would threaten capitalism itself. On Iran, they oppose only Trump's incompetence, not the war aims themselves. In major cities across the country, they are carrying out massive austerity. They are a party of Wall Street and US imperialism.

A recent webinar, involving Bernie Sanders and representatives of academic workers unions, was aimed at refocusing attention on purely campus issues while diluting May Day into empty moral abstractions.

Sanders' function for more than a decade has been to capture and suppress growing left-wing opposition. He is an ardent

nationalist who has worked with right-wing Republicans on "America First" trade bills, supports "secure borders," and has voted repeatedly for military budgets and funding for Israel.

Officials from the UAW took part as its top leadership, including Democratic Socialists of America member and Region 9A Director Brandon Mancilla, vetoed a strike at Columbia University and threatened to put the local union under trusteeship if it did not drop political demands against Trump's attack on democratic rights.

The words "revolution," "capitalism" and "equality" were never mentioned. The war in Iran was not addressed. Sanders attempted to water down internationalism from a revolutionary principle into a moral appeal that leaves class relations untouched: "We share a common humanity, that my pain is your pain, and your family's needs are my needs."

One of the chief lessons of May Day is that the emancipation of the working class requires a struggle for independence from capitalist politics in all forms, and from the agents of capitalism in the union bureaucracy.

Massive struggles are on the horizon in the United States. It is impossible for a country with this level of inequality and such open criminality by the political elite to suppress social tensions indefinitely with dishonest phrases and maneuvers. The logic of the development is towards a mass political strike, unifying the struggles of the working class against exploitation into a broader fight against American capitalism.

To realize this potential, an alternative leadership must be trained and developed. Such a leadership must be guided by a historically and internationally grounded perspective. May Day is imbued with the struggle for socialism and an end to capitalism and war. These powerful traditions must be revived under conditions of a growing movement of resistance around the world, which is increasingly taking the form of a rebellion against the pro-war and pro-capitalist union apparatus.



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