

# “May Day Strong” in Chicago: Labor bureaucracy, Democrats seek to smother growing resistance to war and Trump dictatorship

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The May Day Strong events in Chicago on May 1 were not a celebration of the international working class holiday—they were a preemptive strike by the AFL-CIO labor bureaucracy and the Democratic Party, aimed at preventing the surging movement of workers and young people against Trump from evolving into a politically conscious challenge to oligarchic rule and the capitalist system that both parties defend.

Tens of thousands marched in Chicago, reflecting the enormous opposition among workers and youth to Trump’s attacks on immigrants, democratic rights, and living standards, and his criminal war against Iran. But the political character of the day was not determined by the aspirations of those in the streets, but by those on the stage.

May Day was born in this city in blood. On May 1, 1886, 300,000 US workers struck, 40,000 of them in Chicago, for the eight-hour day. The Haymarket martyrs—Albert Parsons, August Spies, Adolph Fischer and George Engel—were hanged after a frame-up trial for their role in leading that struggle. A fifth, Louis Lingg, committed suicide in prison. It was in their honor that the founding congress of the Second International in 1889 declared May 1 to be the international workers holiday. For the Democratic Party and its union allies at the Haymarket memorial and at Union Park, mouthing phrases about these heroic revolutionary fighters while systematically suppressing every serious struggle that could threaten capitalist rule is cynicism that borders on desecration.

## Two stages, one purpose

The day unfolded in two distinct settings. In the morning, UAW President Shawn Fain, Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson and delegations of union bureaucrats from Italy’s CGIL and France’s Force Ouvrière gathered at the Haymarket memorial. Fain affixed a plaque honoring the 1886 martyrs alongside what he called the “Stand Up Strikers of 2023”—an obscene comparison, given that after 97 percent of GM, Ford and Stellantis workers voted to

strike, Fain kept most of the workforce on the job, producing profits for the auto companies while only a small fraction walked out. The presence of Italian and French union bureaucrats was choreographed to project an image of internationalism, but this was a façade. Fain’s actual program is enthusiastic support for Trump’s “America First” tariffs, designed to pit US workers against their brothers and sisters in Mexico, Canada and every other country.

Fain, Johnson and other speakers were completely silent on Trump’s criminal war against Iran. This was no surprise, as the Democrats back American imperialism’s drive to restore global hegemony. Moreover, Fain has offered the services of the UAW bureaucracy to suppress resistance to the brutal demands of a wartime economy.

He has blocked a series of strikes in the defense industry or shut them down before they could disrupt the Pentagon’s production expansion plans. Most recently, the UAW leadership twice refused to authorize a strike by Columbia University graduate student workers, who voted 91.5 percent in favor of authorization and 82.2 percent to begin striking April 23. Their demands—for protection from ICE, for cops off campus, for anti-surveillance measures and for divestment from weapons manufacturers complicit in the Gaza genocide—were deemed too political. UAW Region 9A Director Brandon Mancilla, a Democratic Socialist of America member, ordered the workers to water down their demands. This is the real face of Fain’s “militant unionism.”

At the Haymarket memorial, Johnson invoked the language of the general strike, positioning himself as a proponent of labor militancy. It was a performance. Johnson is a former CTU lobbyist who played a central role in suppressing the very teachers strike last year that could have galvanized working class resistance to Trump. His call for a general strike has no more substance than Fain’s—who has conveniently scheduled his own call for a general strike for May Day 2028, timed to coincide with the labor bureaucracy’s campaign to elect a Democratic president.

In the afternoon, a large rally at Union Park featured CTU President Stacy Davis-Gates, Johnson and other speakers, who addressed tens of thousands with calls for coalition-building,

expanded democracy and multiracial unity—conspicuously empty of any programmatic content that would threaten the interests of the ruling class. Again, not a single Democratic Party or union official said a word about the US-Israeli war on Iran, the most immediate expression of imperialism’s drive toward world war, offering a silence that indicates their support.

## 2025 CTU sellout a green light for ICE terror

Nothing exposes the fraud of Johnson’s general strike rhetoric more clearly than the events of March 2025. With Trump launching an existential assault on public education, witch-hunting immigrant workers and youth and preparing for war, 28,000 Chicago teachers were ready to strike. Such a walkout could have become the spearhead of a working-class counter-offensive across the country. Instead, Davis-Gates, working hand-in-glove with AFT President Randi Weingarten, Mayor Johnson and the Democratic Party, blocked it. They imposed a four-year sellout contract, concealing from educators the true scale of the budget crisis in Chicago Public Schools and the deep cuts already being planned. CTU leaders falsely claimed the deal would “Trump-proof” the district. Shortly after ratification of the new agreement, Johnson himself announced that “the situation had changed” and deep cuts would be unavoidable.

The consequences were catastrophic. The CTU’s betrayal gave Trump and his accomplices in both parties the green light to accelerate attacks on the working class, and in June he began to unleash ICE terror. Within weeks, the Trump administration accelerated up-to-then unprecedentedly violent immigration raids in Chicago. In the following winter came the ICE occupation of Minneapolis, resulting in mass deportations and the murders of anti-ICE protesters Renée Nicole Good and Alex Pretti.

When rank-and-file workers in Minneapolis demanded a general strike to drive out ICE, the union bureaucracy blocked it, explicitly citing the no-strike clauses in the labor agreements they themselves had signed. The same contracts the bureaucracy negotiates are instruments for suppressing working class action at the moments of greatest urgency.

In early 2026, Chicago teachers again demanded CTU support for walkouts in solidarity with Minneapolis. Davis-Gates refused and instead directed educators to boycott Target, whose executives are headquartered in Minneapolis, as a way of pressuring the corporation to ask Trump to restrain his Gestapo. This is the reality behind CTU’s performative radicalism.

## The Democrats: Trump’s enforcers

The Democrats bear direct responsibility for Trump’s return to power and function as active enforcers of his agenda. Democratic Governor Tim Walz of Minnesota cut a deal with Trump allowing

state and local Democrats to take over deportation duties and police the repression of anti-ICE protesters, freeing up federal ICE agents for redeployment elsewhere.

Most recently, Democrats in Congress paved the way for a \$70 billion infusion to ICE and Border Patrol through a cynically engineered maneuver: DHS funding was split so Republicans could ram through the money via budget reconciliation. Democratic Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer himself suggested the scheme, having met with Trump in the wake of the Minneapolis killings to counsel the administration on how to preserve its “credibility.” As tens of thousands in Minneapolis demanded a general strike to abolish ICE, Schumer was in the White House advising Trump on crisis management. The Democrats do not oppose Trump’s fascist program, they help to manage it.

## The road forward

The working class is ready to fight. The mass radicalization visible in Chicago on May Day, in the No Kings protests nationwide, in the Minneapolis uprising, and the growing wave of strikes, defeated sellout agreements and massive strike mandates reflect genuine determination.

This movement must not be channeled back into the Democratic Party and smothered, but developed into a conscious industrial and political counter-offensive.

The only road forward is a *decisive* break with the Democratic Party and the labor bureaucracy. Workers and youth must build rank-and-file committees, independent of the union apparatus, to take control of their own struggles. The fight against Trump’s attacks on democratic rights, immigrant workers and public education, and American imperialism’s plans for world war, requires mass action including a genuine general strike. This must be combined with the revival of the revolutionary traditions of May Day and the building of a conscious political leadership, based on Trotskyism, to lead the fight for workers’ power and international socialism.



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