

May Day: A History of Political Protest

By Dr. Mark Leier, Associate Professor, Director, Centre for Labour Studies, Department of History, Simon Fraser University, with research by Kristin Schachtel and Dale McCartney

The origins of May Day as a day of workers' protest are well-documented and well-known. Delegates to the International Workers' Congress held at Paris in July 1889 called upon workers around the world to hold a one-day demonstration to fight for the 8-hour day. 1 May 1890 was chosen for the protest, timed to coincide with the launching of the American Federation of Labor's (AFL) long planned campaign for the shorter work day. Originally intended only as a single day of solidarity, May Day captured the attention of working people around the world. A century later, May Day was recognized as an official holiday in 107 countries and as an unofficial labour day in others, including Canada and the United States. It is a day often marked with parades, demonstrations, and festivities, with its symbols of red flowers and red sashes signifying, in the words of historian Eric Hobsbawm, "renewal, growth, hope, and joy."¹

The significance of May Day as a day of workers' celebration does not, however, lie in its recognition as an official, legislated holiday. It lies in the fact that it was originally asserted unofficially, often without legal sanction or permit, and often by rank and file workers rather than labour leaders. Workers themselves proclaimed the day; they did not receive it as a day granted by the state. In this it stands as a counterpoint to

¹ Philip S. Foner, *May Day: A Short History of the International Workers' Holiday, 1886-1986*. New York: International Publishers, 1986, 3-4; Eric Hobsbawm, "Birth of a Holiday: The First of May," in *Uncommon People: Resistance, Rebellion, and Jazz*. New York: The New Press, 1998, 113-27; Eric Hobsbawm, "Mass-Producing Traditions: Europe, 1870-1914," in *The Invention of Tradition*, Eric Hobsbawm, Eric Ranger, eds. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984, 263-307. The quote is from 284. The Congress, sometimes called the International Socialist Congress, would form the Second International.

Labour Day in Canada and the US, and as a counterpoint to other holidays proclaimed by the state to mark religious and nationalist occasions.

Its success as a self-proclaimed, secular day of celebration is due to several factors. May Day has long been celebrated as an announcement of rebirth; spring rituals such as the May Pole, for example, may be traced to antiquity. If the selection of 1 May for an international protest was not purposely timed to take advantage of this, combining political action with a customary festival gave the celebrations a deeper significance and facilitated the idea of a workers' holiday. More importantly, by 1890, labour movements in many industrial countries had considerable strength and were prepared to flex their muscles. 1889 saw the development of the New Unionism in Britain, a movement that drew in masses of unskilled workers and women into unions. In Germany, the Social Democratic Party received 20 per cent of the popular vote in 1890, a development that astonished Bismarck and emboldened labour. In the United States, two labour movements were growing simultaneously. Craft unions of skilled workers were expanding and creating new organizations that aimed at increasing their power. In 1881, the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions of the United States and Canada, (FOTLU) was formed as an umbrella organization of craft unions, and would re-form itself into the American Federation of Labor five years later. In Canada, the Trades and Labor Congress (TLC) was founded in 1883 to bring greater unity to the craft union movement; in British Columbia, the Vancouver Trades and Labor Council was created for the same reasons in 1889. Equally important, by the 1880s, the Knights of Labor was at its zenith. This union set out to organize the majority of workers in Canada and the United States who did not have a trade and so could not join craft unions. The first of the

industrial unions, the Knights organized unskilled workers, factory hands, and those excluded from the craft unions by their race, ethnicity, and gender into a mass movement that rivaled the AFL and TLC in strength and influence. So powerful were the Knights of Labor that Canadian Prime Minister John A. Macdonald ranked the union with Louis Riel, temperance, and Irish home rule as one of the foremost political challenges he faced.

Finally, 1 May was already a day of considerable significance for the US labour movement. In the United States, the construction trades had often held rallies in the spring to pressure employers to sign new contracts for 1 May. In 1867, workers in Chicago staged huge rallies and strikes to demand that the legislation for the 8-hour day be enforced in Illinois. By 1881, the Knights of Labor called for mass action to win the 8-hour day and entertained resolutions for days of protest to be launched on the first Monday of May and September. The following year, FOTLU was urged by a member of the Carpenters and Joiners union to organize to pronounce the 8-hour day, with the admonition that "they ought to enforce it themselves," that is, by refusing to work longer.²

The idea that workers should rely on their own efforts, that is, on direct action ranging from days of protest to general strikes, rather than exclusively on political action and legislation, to institute the 8-hour day, spread rapidly. In 1884, FOTLU formally resolved to investigate the feasibility of a general strike for shorter hours with a deadline of 1 May 1886 for action. Nearly 90 per cent of the affiliated unions supported the initiative. Significantly, Samuel Gompers, the head of FOTLU and later the AFL, who represented the conservative wing of the labour movement, helped draft the resolution.

² Cited in Foner, 16.

While Terence Powderly, the leader of the Knights of Labor, opposed the call for the general strike, he was overwhelmed by the rank and file who enthusiastically supported the initiative.

Thus by 1886, the characteristics of May Day as a day of labour's protest had been loosely set. It would represent all organized workers, skilled and unskilled, craft and industrial. It would be held, if necessary, in defiance of union leaders. It would pose a powerful challenge to both employers and the state, insisting on shorter hours by exerting the workers' fundamental power, the refusal to work, rather than legislation and voting. Extra-legal, direct action was the essence of the strategy. "Lay down your tools on May 1, 1886," one pamphlet enjoined, "cease your labor, close the factories, mills, and mines—for one day in the year." Instead of a holiday, May Day would be "one day of revolt—not of rest!" It would not be a day "ordained by the bragging spokesmen of institutions holding the world of labor in bondage." Instead, it would be "a day on which labor makes its own laws and has the power to execute them! All without the consent or approval of those who oppress and rule....A day of protest against oppression and tyranny, against ignorance and war of any kind." Quoting a popular song, the pamphlet concluded that May Day would be "a day on which to begin to enjoy 'eight hours for work, eight hours for rest, eight hours for what we will.'"³

The momentum built, and on 1 May 1886, half a million workers—the equivalent of perhaps 3,000,000 today—took to the streets in cities across the United States to demonstrate peacefully for the 8-hour day. Chicago was the centre of the agitation, where upwards of 30,000 workers went on strike, and 100,000 took part in the street parades. The day was more than a protest rally. While 1 May fell on a Saturday that year, it was a

³ Cited in Foner, 19.

work day, and so the first workers' May Day, was also a day of strikes. To reinforce the point, many workers refused to work on the following Monday as well. In Chicago, thousands stayed out, and 6,000 striking lumbermen rallied near an ongoing strike and lock-out at the McCormick Harvester plant.

Unlike May Day itself, the rally at McCormick Harvester turned violent as scabs and picketers battled. The real violence, however, came at the hands of the Chicago police. Long accustomed to ending strikes with bloodshed, the police fired into the crowd, killing four people and wounding many others. The labour movement responded by calling another demonstration for the following day, this time to protest the actions of the authorities. With the long-scheduled May Day demonstration over, the spectre of police repression in the air, and several other rallies already scheduled, the turn-out was small. Perhaps 3,000 people turned out to hear speakers at Haymarket Square denounce the government and the police, and this dwindled to about 200 by the end. At that point, the police swooped in to break up the proceedings. As they moved in on the speakers, a bomb exploded and killed one policeman and injuring several others. The police again fired on the protestors, killing at least one and wounding others; in their panic, more police were killed by friendly fire than by the bomb itself.⁴

The Haymarket Affair became the pretext for authorities to crack down on labour, political radicals, and the 8-hour day movement. Martial law was declared as the first Red Scare was launched. Hundreds of people were arrested, and many were brutally interrogated. In the end, eight men were put on trial for the murder of the policeman killed by the bomb. The trial was widely regarded at the time as a judicial farce, and

⁴ Paul Avrich, *The Haymarket Tragedy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984; Henry David, *The History Of The Haymarket Affair: A Study In The American Social-Revolutionary And Labor Movements*. 1936. 2nd edition. New York: Russell and Russell, 1958.

historians have concurred with this judgement. It was clear that the accused were being tried for their political ideas, not their actions. The final charge was not that of murder, but of conspiracy, a much easier charge to prove. Indeed, there was no evidence that they had taken any part in the bombing. Most of the accused were not even in Haymarket Square when the bomb was thrown, and much of the evidence was falsified. Nonetheless, all eight were convicted of conspiracy, and seven were sentenced to death. In the end, three served long prison sentences, another committed suicide, and four were hanged. The trial, imprisonment, and execution of the men who would become known as the Haymarket martyrs drew protests from around the world. Six years later, the governor of Illinois pardoned the jailed men and announced that all had been innocent of wrongdoing.

The 1886 May Day campaign had lasting effects. Approximately 200,000 American workers achieved the 8-hour day, and more saw some shortening of the work day. If the repression in the aftermath of Haymarket set the labour movement back, by 1888, the AFL had regrouped and set 1 May 1890 as the next round in the fight to secure the 8-hour day. This is the context in which the Paris delegates agreed to support the AFL and make the protest an international one. May Day had a history as an appropriate day for labour action and solidarity before the delegates even assembled.

Calling for an international day of protest, however, raised new questions. Conditions in each country were very different. Some labour movements believed there would be mass support for demonstrations for the 8-hour day, but not for strike action. Since 1 May 1890 was a Thursday, this was an immediate issue. Other labour movements believed the rank and file strongly favoured a general withdrawal of labour, and that the point of May Day could best be made by strike action, legal or not. The Paris resolution

deftly solved the problem by resolving that workers in each nation should organize the demonstrations in the manner that best suited conditions in their country. Friedrich Engels and August Bebel, both colleagues of the late Karl Marx, agreed that German workers should not go on strike. Bismarck was too strong, and they feared that reprisals by the state would hurt the growing labour movement and harm the political opportunities of the Social Democratic Party. Despite the cautions of the two socialists, thousands of German workers struck on 1 May, while others stayed on the job and took part in celebrations and demonstrations after work.

The British labour movement was more cautious. It held its official day of demonstration and celebration on Sunday, 4 May, bringing 300,000 workers into Hyde Park. In contrast, Austrian workers went out on 1 May and shut down the city of Vienna. In virtually every major European city, workers observed 1 May with strikes, parades, or festivals. Across the United States, thousands of workers left work to participate in demonstrations and rallies. Despite his initial reluctance to support the movement wholeheartedly, Engels concluded that the "proletariat of Europe and America" was "mobilized for the first time as one army, under one flag, and fighting for one immediate aim: an eight-hour working day...." Across the ocean, and across the political spectrum, the conservative Samuel Gompers noted with satisfaction that May Day was regarded as "a sort of new Independence Day" for workers.⁵

The Paris delegates had conceived of May Day as a single event rather than a regular occurrence. Workers, however, continued to organize May Day throughout the 1890s. In 1891, demonstrations in Italy and France on 1 May were broken up by police, while German workers delayed their marches until the following Sunday, 3 May, to avoid

⁵ Cited in Foner, 54-6

confrontations. 1892 saw a huge turnout in England, largely because 1 May fell on a Sunday and the question of striking could be avoided. In the United States, however, workers celebrated on the Saturday and the Monday, largely because they could not obtain parade permits for Sunday.⁶ In subsequent years, Britain and Germany continued to hold celebrations on the first Sunday in May, and their refusal to stop work on 1 May became the subject of debate in the Second International. The Austrian labour movement in particular insisted that the essential point of May Day was precisely that it was a day taken by workers in defiance of the law and the employer, and urged all countries to celebrate 1 May, regardless of what day it fell upon. By 1894, the British socialist and labour movement had split on the question, and the Social Democratic Federation held its demonstrations on Tuesday, 1 May, that year. 1894 was also the year that the English artist William Crane, a notable figure in the Arts and Crafts movement and famous as the illustrator of *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, contributed the first of a series of drawings for May Day, combining the motifs of early May celebrations with those of the labour movement. By 1896, the German labour movement and the Social Democratic Party affirmed that May Day should best be commemorated with a work stoppage, and urged workers to leave work on 1 May wherever possible. In 1904, the Second International strengthened its initial resolution to declare that "the most effective way of demonstrating on May First is by stoppage of work," and called upon all trade unions to cease work on that day whenever they could without suffering injury.

By the turn of the century, May Day was established in the popular mind as a day on which workers should withdraw their labour without official sanction, even if the political climate in some countries made the work stoppage impossible. As the historian

⁶ Foner, 62

Eric Hobsbawm has noted, May Day was the only holiday associated with industrial workers, and the "public parade of the workers as a class formed the core of the ritual....Most crucially, it asserted the working-class presence by that most fundamental assertion of working-class power: the abstention from work."⁷

It was precisely this assertion that led employers and the state to seek ways to incorporate May Day as an official holiday devoid of its explicitly political character. When the American and Canadian governments set aside the first Monday in September as Labour Day in 1894, workers were urged to celebrate then instead of 1 May. May Day was cast as a "European" and radical holiday foreign to loyal workers who were expected to abjure socialism as they assimilated to the mainstream culture. This message was intensified after the Russian Revolution of 1917, when the Soviet Union adopted May Day as an official holiday, and governments increasingly sought to incorporate or abolish 1 May. In 1920, the French government suggested that May Day should stress national unity rather than workers' solidarity, while Fascist Italy simply banned May Day celebrations in 1923 and substituted 21 April as a holiday to commemorate the Roman empire. A decade later Nazi Germany took over May Day, making it an official National Day of Labour; the next day, the government outlawed trade unions and arrested union leaders. Fascist Spain and Vichy France likewise took over May Day and attempted to make it over into a state-sponsored holiday rather than one asserted by workers, while at the height of the Cold War, American governments recast May Day as "Loyalty Day" and "Law Day" in an attempt to strip 1 May of any labour or socialist connotations. In the same way, the adoption of May Day by the European Economic Community was both

⁷ Hobsbawm, "Mass-producing Traditions," 285-6.

recognition of the tradition of the spontaneous, unsanctioned celebration of May Day and an attempt to separate the *de facto* holiday from its labour roots.

Ironically, the labour movement itself aided this process. While May Day often brought workers together, it also had the potential to split the movement as different unions and leaders adopted different tactics and strategies. It has been noted, for example, that British and German unions originally celebrated May Day on the first Sunday of the month in order to avoid confrontation and work stoppages. As the labour movement in the United States and Canada developed, fissures and disagreements developed as well. Thus while Samuel Gompers played an important role in the creation of May Day, by 1905 the AFL recognized the September Labor Day as the day of celebration. Increasingly, it was the left wing of the labour movement, from the Industrial Workers of the World, or Wobblies, to the Communist Parties, and ethnic communities that insisted that 1 May be recognized—and taken—as the workers' day.

May Day in British Columbia reflects this complicated heritage. In the 1870s, before 1 May was established as a labour holiday, Victoria celebrated the day with picnics, early shop closings, games, and music. In 1886, the events of Chicago, ranging from the peaceful demonstrations of 1 May to the tragedy of Haymarket, were given considerable attention in the local press. By 1890, Vancouver Island workers were beginning their own May Day celebrations in conjunction with the international labour movement. The Victoria Federated Trades and Labour Council held a banquet on 1 May to celebrate the shorter hours movement, and local politicians and labour leaders gave speeches on wages, the length of the working day, and the quality of life for workers. They could not help but be aware of international events, for the Victoria paper gave

extensive coverage of US and European marches and protests even as it praised local labour leaders for their peaceful protests and reasonable demands.⁸

The following year Nanaimo miners organized a Miners' Ball for 1 May to raise money for miners locked out at the South Wellington mine. By 1892, the miners were more militant. They held no celebrations on 1 May; instead, they took Monday, 2 May, off to celebrate May Day in an assertion of their independence. Presumably Tuesday was rather more like a holiday as well, as the ball held by the Miners' and Mine Labourers' Protective Association continued until four in the morning. The MMLPA continued to hold May Day balls and in 1900 voters in the constituency of North Nanaimo chose 1 May to nominate W.W.B. McInnes as an independent labour candidate for the upcoming provincial election.⁹

May Day continued to be a focal point for labour activity. Victoria carpenters declared in 1902 that "on and after May 1st the working day shall be eight hours and that wages shall regulate themselves." The following year they met on 30 April to discuss their demand for higher wages that would begin on May Day. That same year, the Victoria branch of the Socialist Party of British Columbia held a May Day banquet in the city's labour hall and invited socialist MLA James Hawthornthwaite to speak. In 1908, 1909, and 1910, when 1 May fell on the week-end, they purposefully held the celebrations on the Friday, underscoring that abstaining from work was the essence of the workers' day. This sentiment was shared by Vancouver's bakers, who refused to work on

⁸ *Victoria Daily Times*, 30 April 1886, 1 May 1886, 2 May 1886, 3 May 1886, 4 May 1886; *Victoria Daily Times*, 20 April 1890, 30 April 1890, 1 May 1890, 2 May 1890

⁹ *Victoria Daily Times*, 29 April 1891, 1 May 1891, 2 May 1891; *Victoria Daily Times*, 30 April 1892, 2 May 1892, 3 May 1892; *Victoria Daily Times*, 2 May 1900

1 May 1911, while Victoria's teamsters timed a strike against the city's shippers for the same day and won an increase in wages.

Socialists in British Columbia paid especial attention to May Day in this period, even though the Socialist Party of BC and its heir, the Socialist Party of Canada, refrained from officially joining the Second International. In 1903, Vancouver members organized an "International Labor Day Demonstration" for 1 May and brought the fiery socialist speaker E.T. Kingsley from Nanaimo to speak. The party newspaper, *The Western Socialist*, published a lengthy history of "Labor's International Day" on 1 May that outlined the struggle for the 8-hour day and the 1889 resolution of the International Socialist Congress, and critiqued the AFL for celebrating the September Labour Day instead of May Day. By 1905, the paper, now named the *Western Clarion*, extended its critique. It noted that "in the great centers of population in the European countries they lay down their tools and devote the day to social intercourse and the cause of labor. Upon this western continent the workers are gradually following in their footsteps." But, the paper lamented, "as class consciousness and the spirit of class solidarity is not yet sufficiently developed among the workers of the western world to enable them to lay down the tools of labor whether their employers are willing or not, they are following the custom of giving over the Sunday nearest to May first, for the purpose of an international labor day." Bowing to expediency, the SPC held a picnic in North Vancouver on Sunday, 30 April, and a public meeting the same evening at the Vancouver city hall. Commenting on the SPC's plans for May Day, the Conservative newspaper *Vancouver Daily Province* observed that "May Day is the greatest of all days of the year in the calendar of Socialism," and explained that it would be celebrated on the Sunday so those "who could

not take time from their labors to attend a celebration on Monday will be able to join in the Sunday festivities." About 200 attended the picnic, and about 600 turned out to the city hall to hear addresses by the socialist MLAs Parker Williams and Hawthornthwaite. "Labor produces all wealth," thundered Williams, and he charged workers to "use the political power to obtain the wealth for themselves, instead of allowing the propertied class to use that power to take it from them." Religion, Hawthornthwaite insisted, aimed at making the worker a "humble, devoted, miserable slave to the class that oppresses him," while judges were "appointed by the capitalists in the interests of the capitalists, and they have never failed to do their duty by the capitalists." The conservative trade union movement too came under attack. Hawthornthwaite insisted that it did not serve the real interests of the workers. "Like hell," he asserted, "it served to delude them and to lead them further from their freedom." The only hope of the workers, he concluded, was political action.¹⁰

The *World* used this argument against Hawthornthwaite to draw a line between the "avowed revolutionist...a reviler of the institutions of the country, religious, judicial, and governmental," and the "steady, clear-headed supporters of the labor movement who had the intelligence to see that nothing was to gained by setting employers and employed by the ears." The paper deplored Hawthornwaite's decision to "make himself the mouthpiece of incendiarism" rather than acting "only as the advocate in the house of the legitimate claims of workers," as had the "great labor leaders of England whom all classes delight to honor." Hawthornthwaite's speeches, and the reaction of the daily press, revealed that the left and the right both understood the political potential of May Day,

¹⁰ *Western Socialist*, 24 April 1903, 1 May 1903; *Western Clarion* 29 April 1905, 6 May 1905; *Vancouver Daily Province*, 25 April 1905; *Vancouver Daily World*, 1 May 1905, 3 May 1905

even if they disagreed bitterly on its desirability. On 1 May itself, Vancouver papers reported on May protests and celebrations around the world, including the clash of workers and troops in Warsaw that resulted in the death of three people. The final toll would be ten times higher. The papers noted that a large demonstration in St. Petersburg was calm, but the reports were premature. As thousands of Russian workers and peasants peacefully protested in front of the tsar's palace, calling for better conditions, the tsar panicked and ordered in the army. Hundreds of people were killed by the troops, making May Day in Russia a day of mourning as well as celebration. Other stories highlighted the launching of a brewers' strike in Seattle and "labor peace" in Chicago, while 35,000 workers in New York threatened strike action. In Vancouver, plumbers launched their own strike on 1 May to demand higher wages.¹¹

Hawthornthwaite's speech also indicated that BC workers were, like workers elsewhere, divided on the issue of May Day itself. The socialists did not "recognize labor's celebration on the first Monday in September, which they class as 'Capitalist Labor Day.'" In contrast, the Vancouver Trades and Labour Council (VTLC), following the lead of Samuel Gompers, had celebrated Labour Day in the fall as early as 1890, four years before it was proclaimed by Ottawa. While the first September Labour Day celebration stressed workers and their trades, the day soon became virtually indistinguishable from other official holidays, with businesses contributing as many floats emblazoned with corporate advertising as unions. By 1897, the *World* could note

¹¹ *Vancouver Daily World*, 1 May 1905, 3 May 1905;

approvingly that "Labor Day in Canada has no meaning or significance if fails to offer to all classes of fellow-citizens a message of peace and good will."¹²

In contrast, the Socialist Party of Canada, largely composed up of union workers, insisted that "the first of May is a universal holiday of the proletariat; it is a day of rest, of protest, and of demonstration. May Day is not granted; it is wrested by the progressive proletariat of the world, and is, therefore, a true, genuine workingman's holiday. Its origin, its consecration, its spirit is international and proletarian." Two years later, the *Western Clarion* drew the parallel between the renewal of spring and the hope of the working class, for if 1909 had been "a dull grey year for the working class...yet the slave, from his winter of discontent, would fain, like nature, change the brown rags of slavery and his bonds with the opening buds, rise with his class on May Day."¹³

The article was more than a rhetorical flourish. It reflected the growing militancy expressed by Canadian workers as strike activity increased between 1910 and 1912. Nova Scotia miners would embark on a long coal strike in 1910; BC workers, led by members of the SPC, would create the BC Federation of Labour on the first Monday following May Day that same year. In 1911, the Vancouver construction trades, often considered part of the conservative wing of labour, formed a joint bargaining council and engaged in a widespread strike. May Day of that year saw "International Labor Day...being observed by unusual activity on the part of several crafts and trades of the city who are now strike." 1912 saw the opening of the Vancouver Labour Temple on May Day, the beginning of the Vancouver Island coal strike, and a strike of railway navies led by the radical Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). The IWW would also launch a free speech fight

¹² Mark Leier, *Red Flags and Red Tape: The Making of a Labour Bureaucracy*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995, 108-11.

¹³ *Western Clarion* 18 April 1908; *Western Clarion*, 30 April 1910

to demand the right to speak in Vancouver streets that same year. In keeping with this militancy, the *Western Clarion* continued to emphasize the political nature of May Day. "The first of May is now accepted by the slaves of capital as an occasion upon which they can demonstrate the growing solidarity of labor," it enthused in 1911. "Modern May Day celebrations are not to the liking of the powers that be," the paper continued. "Their exclusive class character, the monster gathering, the time of the year when the months of idleness for so many have scarcely ceased [a reference to seasonal unemployment], the sentiment of the speeches make a combination which is little to the liking of those whose only hope of continued mastership lies in the divisions and ignorance of their slaves." The point of the celebrations was drawn acutely. Masses of workers assembled "in one place, animated by a class motive, and imbued with a class spirit," gave them "some glimmering of their possible power....The aim of those who gather in these meetings is not hidden or obscured. Various differences as to the means may be heard, but the end is the abolition of slavery, total and complete. Authority stands helpless." Unlike Labour Day with its floats proclaiming crafts and businesses alike, the article emphasized, "the first of May is becoming the day upon which labor is pleased to march, not displaying the productive power of their brain and brawn, not to advertise the wares of their masters but to display their vast numbers, their class interests, their power in rebellion, and to advertise their willingness to do the job." The socialist paper reminded readers that "May Day differs from all other days in the fact of its international character. All other commemoration days have more or less a national and restricted interest. May Day is the highest Festival of the World's Proletariat. Its value in uniting in a common consciousness on a common day the fighting forces of the working class is very

great....On the first day of May be at least conscious of the fact that throughout the world millions with hopes and aims like your own, and pledged to redeem their class from its slave hireling status are recounting their past; reviewing the present and planning for the future." The themes of May Day as a workers' celebration, as an independent assertion of workers' power, and as an expression of class consciousness, were all made explicit in the pages of the socialist paper, even if Vancouver workers could not engage in the massive work stoppages that characterized the day in other countries.¹⁴

The daily press, however, played down the significance of 1 May as a workers' day. The *World* cast the 1912 preparations as a foreign and violent importation, writing that "International Labor Day" would be celebrated with a parade largely attended by Russian, Finnish, and "other European-born Socialists." The police "expect trouble," the paper warned, especially from the IWW. At the same time, the paper gave positive attention to New Westminster's May Day celebrations held on Friday, 3 May. "Never before in its history has such keen interest been manifested by the business men and the public in general," the paper approved. Perhaps prompted by the growing fears of a European war, the *World* stressed the patriotism of the Royal City's preparations and the alleged English roots of May Day as a spring festival over the next two years. Meanwhile, the socialist *Western Clarion* loosed a broadside against those occasions when workers were "permitted to parade the streets with bands of music and banner waving and cavort themselves to their hearts' content. They are regaled with patriotic speeches from the masters' henchmen in which the glories of existence under the particular national flag that their masters have hoisted over them are mentioned....These 'Labor Days' are capitalist holidays...." In contrast, the paper insisted, "The celebration of

¹⁴ *World*, 1 May 1911, 2 May 1911; *Western Clarion*, 29 April 1911, 6 May 1911

May Day by the workers of any country does not meet with the approval of the ruling class. It is the day which has been chosen by the most advanced and revolutionary section of the world's workers on which to gather by their thousands to listen to the gospel of discontent, to exchange fraternal greetings with their fellow slaves of other countries to reiterate and emphasize the international solidarity of class interest...." It was precisely to prevent this solidarity and the political action both implied and generated by May Day that governments increasingly relied on repression when faced with peaceful demonstrations and work stoppages.¹⁵

At the same time, labour celebrations on 1 May appear to have dropped off in BC by 1913. In the winter of 1912, the Canadian economy had entered a depression as investment dropped off dramatically in the face of the threat of war. Labour militancy, at least as measured by strike activity, also fell off, and there is little record of May Day celebrations by the Vancouver labour movement. The Retail Clerks did organize themselves into a union, with the explicit aim of reducing hours and improving working conditions, on 30 April 1913. Vancouver Island miners too, continued the tradition, given impetus in September 1912 when the Vancouver Island coal strike began. One of the longest strikes in BC history, it pitted the United Mineworkers of America (UMWA) against four coal companies and lasted for two years. The strike was marked by the provincial government's use of troops to protect scabs, mass arrests and jailing of miners, and sabotage. Despite the violence, or perhaps because of it, the *Victoria Daily Times* editorialized on the tradition of May Day in 1913, stressing that if the day was recognized in other nations as a day of protest and demonstration, such "does not obtain" in Canada. More attention was paid to the crowning of the New Westminster May Queen and the

¹⁵ *World*, 2 May 1912, 2 May 1912; *Western Clarion*, 3 May 1913.

attending festivities, all sanctioned by the city. The only connection to labour was the judging of the children's dancing, where the winner was presented with a banner by Judge Frederick Howay, who would become notorious for the harsh sentences he would hand out to striking Vancouver Island coal miners. But the cheerful New Westminster stories and the editorial were contradicted by a story buried on page 20 of the paper that detailed a manifesto issued by the UMWA. The manifesto called for all of the Island's miners to down tools, even offering strike pay to all workers, union and non-union alike, who would join the strike.¹⁶

The call was largely successful, and May Day 1914 was celebrated as "the first anniversary of the coming out of the miners of the local collieries in sympathy with their fellows of the Cumberland and Union Bay mines." Striking miners and their families observed 1 May, while scabs "put in their day's work just the same." The mayor of Nanaimo, who had close ties to the Conservative provincial government, banned the proposed May Day parade, called out extra militia troops, and refused the request to proclaim a customary half-day holiday. That his professed fears of violence were illusory was demonstrated by the peaceful gathering of strikers and their families at the city's cricket grounds on 1 May, an occasion described by the newspaper as resembling "a Sunday school picnic" in its tranquility. Its content, however, did not, as several socialists and labour leaders gave speeches to the crowd estimated by the paper to be about of 2,500 strong.¹⁷

The *BC Federationist*, the newspaper of the BC Federation of Labour, counted 5-6,000 participants at the Nanaimo celebrations in 1914 despite the hostility of the mayor

¹⁶ *British Columbian*, 30 April 1913; *Victoria Daily Times*, 1 May 1913, 2 May 1913.

¹⁷ *Victoria Daily Times*, 2 May 1914

and the display of the militia. May Day rallied the strikers as they commemorated both the workers' holiday and the anniversary of their expanded strike. The speeches made reference to the international character of May Day, its connection to the 8-hour day movement and the Knights of Labor, to the "international socialist working class parties all over the world," and to the "paramount necessity of well-directed political action."¹⁸

With the outbreak of World War I in August 1914, workers' internationalism and radicalism would soon founder. Caught between patriotism, political repression, and war fever, workers were pressed into military and industrial service. The *BC Federationist* noted bitterly that workers' internationalism had not prevailed to stop the war while the fervent nationalism that would soon see socialist parties and papers banned in Canada made it impossible to hold labour's May Day celebrations. Instead, the day was largely made over by the authorities into a patriotic extravaganza with military bands and floats replacing workers. As social conditions changed during war, however, so too did the labour movement. The war created a labour shortage and this, coupled with the necessity to keep production going, made it easier for workers to join unions and win better conditions. At the same time, the greatly heated-up economy resulted in inflation, and the steep rise in the cost of living gave workers a strong incentive to organize and press for higher wages. Strike activity would increase in the latter years of war and reach its peak in 1919 as support for left-wing parties and organizations such as the One Big Union (OBU), swelled. To this day, the annual number of days lost to strikes has not equaled that of 1919, and if the Winnipeg General Strike was the most famous of the period, it was only the crest of a massive wave of protest, work stoppage, and political mobilization by working people. If in BC little attention was paid to May Day in 1917, with only the

¹⁸ *BC Federationist*, 24 April 1914, 1 May 1914, 8 May 1914

miners of South Wellington organizing any real observance, events elsewhere "portend the rapid approach of the social revolution," wrote the *BC Federationist* approvingly. If the prophecy was overblown, it did reflect the growing strength and radicalism of labour around the world. The following year, cautious May Day celebrations were launched by BC's new Federated Labor Party (FLP), which amalgamated the SPC and other labour and socialist groups. "Plenty of music" accompanied short speeches at the Labor Temple, and the organizers assured people that there would be "something special for the ladies." The *BC Federationist* contained an article on May Day by veteran labour organizer and socialist writer Charles Lestor, who traced the holiday back to ancient Greece, through the middle ages, to 1889 and the Paris resolution. "Down with capitalism! Long live the Social Revolution!" he concluded in a burst of revolutionary fervour. Vancouver Island continued its tradition of celebrating the day with festivities and the expectation that workers would down tools to attend. But the turn-out was low, a result attributed to Canadian Collieries telling its workers that leaving work would be grounds for dismissal and, "unfortunately, many of said slaves hadn't got the nerve to call the bluff." Nonetheless, May Day was "for the purpose of celebrating the international character of the labor movement." The following year, the labour paper noted that a general strike in France and the success of the Bolsheviks in Russia were positive signs, even if "May Day has again come around, but the international solidarity with which May Day is associated is not yet consummated." Indeed, by its end, 1919 would be a year of repression and reaction, with red scares launched in Canada and the US.¹⁹

In 1920, May Day regained some of its status as a workers' holiday as Vancouver union members laid out plans for what they hoped would be "the biggest labor

¹⁹ *BC Federationist*, 4 May 1917, 26 April 1918, 3 May 1918, 10 May 1918, 2 May 1919,

celebration ever held in Greater Vancouver." May Day fell on the Saturday, still a work day for many, and the *BC Federationist* exhorted workers "to take a holiday on 1 May." The following week, the paper printed a large, boxed history of May Day on the front page that ended with the observation, or perhaps the hope, that "the wage slaves this year rejoice. It is the birth of spring indeed, the spring time of the social revolution." The paper noted international events ranging from the "general holiday" planned by British workers to the demands made by French workers to the intention of Russian workers to stay on the job to help build socialism. The plans for May Day were outlined in some detail, and they included a wide range of speakers including Charles Lestor, socialist printer, publisher, editor, and labour council member Parmeter Pettipiece, Winnipeg MLA F.J. Dixon, and others. A children's sports day and a dance were held, but the real purpose of May Day was not forgotten in the midst of the revelry. The proceedings were called a "demonstration," and workers distributed a souvenir program that contained photographs of all the men who were convicted for their role in the Winnipeg General Strike. In an editorial entitled "May Day and Its Promise," the *BC Federationist* wrote that "International Labor Day will be celebrated by the workers in all parts of the world....with more than usual enthusiasm." Radicalism and labour militancy were on the rise, it claimed, with "the lines of demarcation between the owning class and dispossessed...more clearly defined." Observing that the fall Labour Day was more often recognized than May Day in Canada, the paper pointed out that events of the past year, including the Winnipeg General Strike and the subsequent arrests and convictions of labour leaders, had "at last roused the workers of this country to the point where the working-class day of celebration will become the day on which Canada workers will not

only celebrate, but will protest against the actions of the government and the result of the trials." Every city, the editorial continued, would celebrate May Day, and "at every one of these gatherings the actions of the government will be exposed."

The rejuvenated May Day was heralded as an "unqualified success." The crowd was estimated at 2,000, though it was conceded that this was likely a low count. The proceedings were started with a rousing singing of "La Marseillaise," long a hymn of the left, and later, "The Red Flag," anthem of the British left, was sung. Charles Lestor spoke on the history of May Day, drawing the contrast between Old England, when peasants and workers had over 140 religious holidays a year, not counting Sundays, and the present, when workers had to work 52 weeks a year, and often on the Sabbath.²⁰

May Day was celebrated by Victoria's workers as well. Organized by OBU supporters, the proceedings including violin and piano solos, songs, and recitations. The crowd joined in with hearty singing of "The Red Flag" and "The International," aided by song sheets that were printed up and distributed. The political meaning of May Day was not lost: speakers reinforced the message, and proceeds of the day were donated to a needy family as determined by the Ladies' Auxiliary of the OBU. Even the prize to the winner of the whist tournament was a book entitled *The High Cost of Living*.²¹

The following year saw two May Day rallies in Vancouver. The Federated Labor Party held an indoor meeting on 30 April, notable for one of its speakers, Angus MacInnis, the FLP candidate for school trustee. MacInnis would become the federal MP for Vancouver East in 1930 and would help found the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF). An MP for 26 years, MacInnis married Grace Woodsworth, the

²⁰ *BC Federationist*, 23 April 1920, 30 April 1920, 7 May 1920

²¹ *BC Federationist*, 7 May 1920.

daughter of J.S. Woodsworth, and her political career in the CCF and NDP would, if anything, overshadow his when she became BC's first female MP in 1965. The plans for labour demonstrations, however, met with legal and bureaucratic obstacles. Shortly after the labour movement announced plans for a "monster parade and demonstration" for 1 May at the Cambie street grounds, the Vancouver city council denied them permission to use the grounds. It then sought to ban the parade by passing a bylaw that would make it unlawful for people to gather in crowds in the street or other public spaces unless permission had been granted by the city. Another clause required that any authorized parade had to display the Union Jack prominently and to display at least two other British flags for every other flag carried. A delegation of workers met with the mayor to proclaim their right to parade and a compromise was worked out. The mayor acknowledged their right to parade, and understood that "the reason you desire a parade next Sunday is because it is May Day, which is celebrated by Labor in all parts of the world." While the mayor still refused permission to use the Cambie Street grounds, he agreed to make the Hasting Park site available for the demonstration. For their part, the labour delegates agreed to carry the British flag and made it clear they would obey the law and hold an orderly procession. A mass meeting of workers decided unanimously to hold the May Day parade and demonstration, insisting that they had right to march, and the *BC Federationist* called upon workers to "come in your thousands and give your answer to those who would intimidate you."

This victory, however, appeared short-lived when the Hastings Park manager refused to let the labour movement use the grounds. With no place to hold the demonstration, the May Day planning committee reluctantly decided to cancel the

parade. But as historians have pointed out, May Day was often celebrated in spite of the official labour leadership, and the rank and file in Vancouver took matters into their own hands. The day after they were denied use of the grounds, workers held a mass meeting and reversed the decision of the executive, resolving to hold the parade regardless. The One Big Union also weighed in, and voted to boycott the park and the annual exhibition in protest. The pressure of the meeting had the mayor send out the chief of police to assure the workers that they could in fact use Hastings Park. No longer content to rely on the assurances of the city, the mass meeting voted to parade as planned and to hold the rally indoors instead. Two thousand marchers set off at 2:15, with the requisite Union Jack hoisted alongside the red flag of socialism carried by a returned soldier. The twin meetings at the Pender Hall and the Loggers' Hall on Cordova street was packed as it was opened with the singing of "The Red Flag." The crowd was addressed by several speakers, including William Pritchard, who had been arrested and imprisoned for his involvement with the Winnipeg General Strike. Pritchard, who would later become a member of the CCF and mayor of Burnaby in the 1930s, was greeted with a "storm of applause" when he rose to speak. Pritchard brought a roar of laughter from the crowd when he told a story about a South Vancouver man who told him his troubles, starting with the announcement that he had a wife and ten children. When Pritchard sympathized, he continued, the man replied, "Oh, but that's not the worst. Under the this new bylaw if I want to bring my wife and kids down town, I've got to get a permit from the mayor and carry the Union Jack." Another speaker reminded the crowd of the "liberty which the working class had taken for itself and made so"; still another delivered a "scathing arraignment" of "provincial patriotism" and "narrow nationalism." The meetings finished

with another rendition of "The Red Flag," and the day was declared a huge success by the labour newspaper.²²

BC workers had celebrated May Day for more than 30 years by 1921. The forms of the celebration varied drastically depending on economic, social, and political conditions, as it did in other countries. It was fraught with controversy within the labour movement and within the larger society as the respectable and the radical interpreted the meaning of 1 May in different ways and for different purposes. It gained in strength and purpose as the labour and left movements did. When the labour movement flourished, May Day represented the hopes and aspirations of a community that could assert its rights confidently; when it was under attack, May Day reminded workers of the need for solidarity when they had to regroup and wait out the storm. May Day too served different purposes for employers and governments. It could be acknowledged as a day for labour, or turned into a patriotic festival to stress nationalism over class. It could be used to try to separate the "respectable" worker from the radical, the native-born from the "foreigner," the loyal from the disloyal. Tales of red terror from around the world could be used to give readers a frisson of fear while reassuring them that such things did not happen in the peaceable dominion. At worst, May Day could be used as a weapon to deny workers the right to parade and demonstrate. By 1921, it was clear that neither the forms nor the meanings of May Day were rigidly fixed; they were always struggled for and struggled over. What did remain clear was the historical significance of a day that workers believed should be theirs even when they could not simply declare it and take it.

²² *BC Federationist*, 22 April 1921, 29 April 1921, 6 May 1921; *Vancouver World*, 26 April 1921, 29 April 1921.

1921 marked a high point in May Day celebrations by BC workers. The *BC Federationist* made no mention of May Day the following year. In 1923, the paper ran an article on the significance on May Day, but it started on a pessimistic note. If the international strike waves of 1919 and 1920 seemed to promise a radical restructuring of the world, now reaction, counter-revolution, and worse were in the ascendancy. Fascism was "rampant" and "extending its sphere of operations and growing stronger; whether we call it Mussolini or Horthy, Pilsudski or Poincaré is a matter of little moment." In Mussolini's Italy, repression was especially fierce, with thousands of members of the Communist Party rounded up and imprisoned and "subjected to tortures worse than the inventive genius of the Spanish Inquisition ever devised." Workers were being "shot down in the streets of Germany," and "French nationalism shows its fangs, through a malevolence that beclouds its intellect." Was there any hopeful sign? There was the example of the Soviet Union, and perhaps "the magnitude of repression is the measure of the development of revolutionary spirit." But this must have seemed a counsel of despair to many readers. "Let us then lend what aid we can," the paper concluded, but there was little done in Vancouver that May Day; the only information provided in the *BC Federationist* was that Maurice Spector, a founder of the Communist Party of Canada, would give a talk on his recent visit to the Soviet Union. For its part, the *Western Clarion* observed that "there appears a catalogue of present distresses and evidence of the yoke of industrial exploitation now laid upon wage labor. Its hopes and aspirations are still unfulfilled." May Day that year represented "a measure of hope and resolution for freedom from industrial slavery," though apparently a small measure. The following year was no better, and neither paper listed any BC May Day activities; the best the *Western*

Clarion could offer was a reprint of a May Day article first published in its pages in 1920, with a short update tacked on the end. In 1925, it ruefully observed, "the international labor multitude, in its present temper, from the traditional May Day standards, has the appearance of an autopsy."²³ By the end of the year, both the *Clarion* and the *BC Federationist* would also meet their demise. The One Big Union, launched with such enthusiasm in 1919, would founder by 1925; the BC Federation of Labour would collapse; the Vancouver Trades and Labour Council, dominated by socialist union members since 1905, would be run by trade unionists such as Percy Bengough, who worked to diminish the influence of the left and set the Vancouver labor movement on a more conservative path. At the same time, employers and governments cracked down on militant union activists, using the blacklist, deportation, spying, and reforms to roll back the gains workers had made during the war years and the upsurge of 1919.

Not surprisingly, May Day became less important as a workers' day in this period. Certainly the conservatives at the head of the labour movement preferred to celebrate Labour Day rather than May Day, and the *Vancouver Sun* newspaper makes no reference to any 1 May demonstrations by BC workers from 1924 to 1932. Instead, it paid great attention to the civic festivities that centered on the crowning of May Queens, teas, and exhibitions. Increasingly, May Day was used to launch spring sales, with the day advertised as "Economy Day" and "Dollar Day" by merchants. When labour was mentioned, it was usually in the context of dangerous reds in other countries, announced with headlines such as "Red Plot Linked with Moscow and Sofia is Bared," "Making the World Safe for Bolshevism, "Reds of Warsaw Battle," "New Fury Flares in Reds War,"

²³ *BC Federationist*, 27 April 1923; *Western Clarion*, 1 May 1923, 1 May 1924; *Western Clarion*, 1 May 1925.

"May Day Communist Riots Feared," "Riots Crushed in Paris," "3 Die, 16 Hurt in May Day Riots; 78 Communists Arrested"; "Revolution Flares in Lisbon; Reds Riot in Spain and Berlin"; "84 May Day Rioters Executed in Chinese City; Rioting in Many Canadian Cities." These headlines contrasted with stories that "Russia Celebrates," underscoring May Day as a day of foreign radicalism. This theme was picked up in a 1928 article by a Dr. Frank Crane that praised the coming of spring and the rebirth of nature and recalled that "May Day in Europe has often been synonymous with some uprising of the laboring class. " That May Day had North American roots had apparently escaped the attention of the good doctor.²⁴

October 1929 saw the stock market crash that served notice for the Great Depression. On 1 May 1930, Canadian workers served notice that they were again mobilizing. Demonstrations took place in several Canadian cities, and while most were peaceful, police charged a gathering in Calgary and arrested 13 protestors in Sudbury. The following year saw arrests and clashes between labour militants and the police in Calgary, Winnipeg, Regina, Fort William, Port Arthur, Toronto, and Calgary. Many of the demonstrations were organized by the Communist Party of Canada (CPC). Founded in 1921, the CPC offered a radical alternative to the increasingly conservative labour movement. Most of the new union organizing in the 1930s was undertaken by the CPC and its union wing, the Workers' Unity League; the party was especially successful in organizing the unemployed during the depression. Not surprisingly, the party set out to reclaim May Day as a workers' day of protest and activism.

May Day in 1932 showed that both workers' organizations and the authorities understood the potential significance of 1 May. On 26 April, the RCMP and Vancouver

²⁴ *Vancouver Sun*, 1 May 1928

city police launched a pre-dawn raid on the office of the CPC on Cordova Street. Books and documents were seized, along with a number of what the newspapers called "a quantity of wooden clubs," but that turned out to be the sticks and poles used to hoist protest signs, banners, and flags. Police also raided offices of unemployment organization, looking for men who had organized workers in the relief camp at Allco. The raids were announced as a pre-emptive round-up "preparatory to May Day when Communists have threatened to hold militant demonstrations." City council also refused permission for a parade, but did allow a public gathering on Powell Street. One of the organizers issued the permit was Arthur "Slim Evans," a former Wobbly and member of the Carpenter's union who would gain fame as one of the leaders of the On to Ottawa Trek of 1935.²⁵

May Day itself passed without threat to life, limb, or civic order. A crowd variously estimated from 4,500 to 10,000 assembled at the Powell Street grounds, now Oppenheimer Park, a traditional setting for Vancouver's protests and rallies. Many of those in attendance were young unemployed men who walked and rode box cars down from the relief camps to demonstrate against conditions in the camp and against government policies of relief and welfare. There were, however, few placards in sight, for as the organizers explained, these along with the battens to hold them had been seized in the police raids the previous week. The meeting open and closed with the singing of "The International," and red ribbons were sold to the crowd. Arthur Evans addressed the crowd and denounced conservative trade union officials, while other speakers announced a demonstration planned for the following week at the US Consulate to protest the

²⁵ *Vancouver Sun*, 26 April 1932, 28 April 1932

Scottsboro case, widely seen as an attempt to legally lynch nine young black men in Alabama.

The right of BC workers to protest on May Day was tempered by a massive police presence. 300 city, provincial, and federal police, included 40 mounted officers, were readied at the downtown police station, and a naval destroyer with the machine detachment of the Princess Patricia Canadian Light Infantry was dispatched from Esquimalt. The troops stayed on the ship, however, and the Vancouver demonstration was peaceful. In other Canadian cities, however, the police battled with marching workers and made several arrests.²⁶

Vancouver was quiet the following year, as were most Canadian cities. There was no local May Day parade or meeting, but the police maintained a strong presence nonetheless, dispatching special reserves and a detachment of the RCMP to the downtown. The relative quiet did not stop the police from making arrests in Moose Jaw, Montreal, and Toronto, however, on charges such as illegally distributing literature, or simply for questioning. The press also reported on "Music, speeches, bombings, and bloodshed in Europe," and contrasted Berlin's "millions of workers" who participated in open air meetings with German chancellor Adolph Hitler's "pleading for national unity."²⁷

1934 saw no significant reporting on Vancouver's May Day activities organized by labour, but that changed drastically a year later as protests against unemployment and government relief camps became much more intense. In early April, 1,500 relief camp workers walked out of the camps and made their way to Vancouver. There they held

²⁶ *Vancouver Sun*, 2 May 1932, 3 May 1932

²⁷ *Vancouver Sun*, 2 May 1933

dramatic protests, marches, and an occupation of the Hudson's Bay store at Granville Street, demanding municipal, provincial, and federal government aid for the unemployed. In response to mass protests on 23 April at Victory Square, Mayor Gerry McGeer read the Riot Act and 19 men were arrested. These were protests against the government's unemployment policies by the unemployed. Their actions were characterized as strikes and the men themselves as strikers, formed into the Relief Camp Workers' Union. The union formulated clear political demands:

- That work with wages be initiated at a minimum wage of 50 cents an hour and at trade union rates for skilled work, on the basis of a 6-hour day and a 5-day week.
- That all workers in relief camps be covered by workers' compensation and that the camps have proper first aid supplies
- That all military control of the camps be abolished and blacklisting ended
- That democratically elected committees be recognized in every camp
- That the government create a system of non-contributory unemployment insurance
- That all workers be given the right to vote
- That Section 98 of the Criminal Code, Sections 41-2 of the Immigration Act, vagrancy laws, and all anti-working class laws be abolished.

In addition to these demands, Arthur Evans called upon the labour movement to hold a one-hour general strike in sympathy with the relief camp workers. In this context of political mobilization, May Day was about to be claimed again as a workers' day in 1935.²⁸

²⁸ *Vancouver Sun*, 24 April 1935, 25 April 1935

In Cumberland, miners celebrated May Day for the first time in twenty years. About 650 miners closed down the mines, despite the company's insistence that they stay at work, and marched through the town. In Vancouver, between 15,000 and 20,000 strikers, trade unionists, sympathizers, and "revolutionaries of every shade of red" including the CCF and the Communist Party, took to the streets on Wednesday, 1 May. Longshoremen downed tools and several unions agreed to hold a vote on general strike resolutions. Even high school students left classes early in the day to take part, and the entire student body at Vancouver Technical School went out in support. Six union restaurants and a union bakery were shut down when all the employees walked out to participate in May Day under the banner of their union. Following a mass meeting at Cambie Street, the demonstrators formed into a parade headed by a pipe band and marched to Georgia Street and Stanley Park. Two floats drew particular attention to political realities: one was a representation of a relief camp shack, the other a model of the Vancouver cenotaph with an effigy of Mayor McGeer reading the Riot Act. Songs, including "The Red Flag," were sung during the parade, and at Stanley Park, an orchestra played "The Revolutionary Funeral March" to commemorate workers who had been killed in earlier May Day demonstrations. This recognition of the international significance of May Day reflected the make-up of the crowd itself; as the *Vancouver Sun* reported, in it were "represented natives of nearly every country in Europe" and even "some Asiatics."²⁹

The actions against unemployment and government policy that were sharpened and symbolized by May Day continued. On 3 June 1935, the On to Ottawa Trek left Vancouver to take the protest directly to the prime minister. Demanding work and wages,

²⁹ *BC Workers' News*, 3 May 1935; *Vancouver Sun*, 1 May 1935, 2 May 1935;

about 1,000 relief camp strikers and unemployed rode freight trains across BC, Alberta, and Saskatchewan, gathering another 1,000 along the way. Stopped in Regina by the federal government, the strikers were herded into the Regina Exhibition Grounds while eight delegates, including Arthur Evans, continued on to meet with Prime Minister R.B. Bennett. The efforts to win political concessions from the prime minister failed and the talks broke down; when Evans and the other delegates returned to Regina, the RCMP and city police attacked the trekkers with tear gas and batons. The ensuing melee became known as the Regina Riot, and made the Trek a stark example of the indifference of the federal government to the plight of the unemployed; both riot and Trek hastened the political downfall of Prime Minister Bennett.

On 18 June 1935, 1,000 striking Vancouver longshoremen, led by Victoria Cross winner James "Mickey" O'Rourke, marched to the waterfront, where they too were met with tear gas and clubs. The subsequent "Battle of Ballantyne Pier" ended with several injured and arrested and with the collapse of the longshoremen's union. Ballantyne Pier, the Regina Riot, and the On to Ottawa Trek, however, demonstrate that May Day continued to both shape and reflect labour's concerns. As the depression worsened and as more progressive, even radical, responses evolved, May Day again became the important day in labour's calendar, and the strike, by employed and unemployed alike, its clearest symbol.

The political violence that characterized 1935 faded considerably the next year. The large May Day parade was marked with "humor, rather than bitterness," the *Vancouver Sun* reported, in part because the despised R.B. Bennett had gone down to defeat in the October 1935 election and the Liberal party under William Lyon Mackenzie

King had closed the relief camps. In addition, the Liberals benefited from some improvement in the economy. In BC, Premier Duff Pattullo's "little new deal," a program of government works, higher wages, and health insurance, was largely an exercise in promises and Ottawa-bashing, but combined with the upturn in the economy, it gave grounds for cautious optimism. Marchers were adorned with red shirts, red scarves, and red tulips as the parade, which took twenty minutes to pass one spot, made its way along Hastings Street from Victory Square to Burrard Street. In contrast with the previous year, the Friday march was peaceful enough that mothers brought babies in carriages on the march.³⁰

As an occasion to build and show solidarity, 1 May 1937 represented important gains. Fifty-six different organizations worked together to plan the largest parade in Vancouver's history. The May Day Conference Committee included CCF clubs, several unions, social organizations, the Mothers Council of Vancouver, and the Communist Party, and the speakers ranged from a reverend to a CCF representative to members of the CP, the Vancouver Trades and Labour Council, and the Ex-Servicemen's League for Peace, Freedom, and Democracy. The daily press now noted that May Day was "the traditional day of labor and left-wing political organizations," and the parade followed what was now a traditional route from Cambie Street to the cenotaph. There marchers laid a wreath offering "May Day Greetings to Our Fallen Comrades," then they continued along Hastings Street to Burrard Street, then along Burrard to Georgia Street, Stanley Park, and finally Lumberman's Arch, where speeches, music, and sports informed and entertained the crowds.³¹

³⁰ *Vancouver Sun*, 2 May 1936

³¹ *Vancouver Sun*, 30 April 1937, 1 May 1937, 3 May 1937

But King's government was no more able to stave off the impact of the depression than Bennett's had been. After a short recovery, the economy stumbled again. Fear of another European war also helped make 1 May 1938 one of the largest parades and rallies in Vancouver's history. Momentum for the event began a week earlier when 1,100 unemployed men paraded through Vancouver and attended a large assembly at the Powell Street grounds. Organizers of the Relief Project Workers Union promised that 5,000 single unemployed would march in the upcoming May Day parade. On 1 May, at the beginning of the march, the president of the Spanish General Workers' Union laid a wreath at the cenotaph in memory of 14 Canadians, members of the Mackenzie-Papineau battalion of volunteers, who were killed fighting Franco's fascists. The marchers then made their way to Lumberman's Arch to show their support for China and Spain, both under attack by militarist regimes, and to declare which side they were on in the "struggle between Fascism and Democracy." A speech by Samuel Shearer, president of the Railway Carmen's union, outlined the history of May Day, claiming that it has "one significance for the workers in all free countries." The significance was the political struggle for workers' democratic rights, as Shearer indicated with an attack on Quebec's infamous padlock laws. Passed in 1937, the law allowed the provincial government to lock any building that had been used for disseminating "communism" or "bolshevism." It further gave the government the power to confiscate and destroy any printed materials that were defined as communist or Bolshevik, and to imprison, without appeal, anyone who had printed, published, or distributed the material. The law was so vague that it was even used against Jehovah's Witnesses until it was struck down by the Supreme Court of Canada in 1957. But from its inception, it was widely regarded as a bill that attacked, as

Shearer put it, "all democratic workers' parties." Another speaker emphasized that "these demonstrations are the answer of the workers to the Hepburns and Duplessises of Canada," a reference to the Ontario premier who had recently tried to smash a strike of autoworkers in Oshawa with his own private police force and to the premier of Quebec responsible for the padlock laws. Shearer criticized recent BC legislation as well, arguing that the province's recently passed Industrial Arbitration Act was aimed at "detering workers from the right to strike," and his speech brought cheers from the crowd of 20,000.³²

The threat of war weighed heavier on May Day celebrants the following year. Speeches and floats called for resistance to fascism, for support for the embargo against Japan, called to hamper its military aggression in China, and more traditional labour issues. The origins of May Day as a fight for shorter hours, for example, was summed up by the banner of the Pacific Coast Fishermen's Union, which read, "We Fish to Live, Not Live to Fish." The Hotel and Restaurant Employees' Union entered a float consisting of a giant tea cup to symbolize their craft, and organizations ranging from the CCF to the Progressive Doukhobors supplied bands and floats.³³

With the outbreak of war later that year, labour scaled back succeeding May Days considerably. As in World War I, wartime production pulled the economy out of the depression and created full employment, even labour shortages. This encouraged workers to unionize and to strike at levels unseen since 1919. The need to maintain national unity and production meant that governments were much less inclined to adopt the harsh labour relations methods of Hepburn and Duplessis. Instead they sought to reach

³² *Vancouver Sun*, 25 April 1938, 2 May 1938

³³ *Vancouver Sun*, 1 May 1939

accommodations with unions whenever possible and encouraged employers to do the same. Federal labour legislation, culminating in Privy Council Order 1003 in 1944, established unions on a stronger legal footing and forced employers to recognize and bargain with them. PC 1003 created the precedents that subsequent federal and provincial labour law would follow and marked out the industrial relations regime that would characterize the so-called postwar settlement of 1945 to 1974.

May Day 1943 reflected this cautious cooperation between state, business, and labour. Instead of charging the crowd, a police escort led the parade. The crowd cheered references to the "four great United Nations leaders, Churchill, Roosevelt, and Chiang Kai Shek," and even those to General Andrew McNaughton, who had overseen the hated relief camps but was now the senior Canadian military officer in the United Kingdom. Labour's role in the war effort was put front and centre as speakers implored workers to "keep the planes, ships, tanks, and guns rolling from the production lines until Fascism is vanquished." Canadian Major-General George Pearkes, head of the Pacific Command, shared the podium with Pat Sullivan, vice-president of the Trades and Labour Congress, and praised the contribution of workers to the war and linked their struggles to those of the soldiers. "It is a wonderful thing," the general told the May Day rally, "how the soldier and workers are cooperating in this war. The armed forces today are fighting for all that peace will bring to this land, to their children, and to you." The general could even praise "our gallant Soviet ally," who but a few years earlier was regarded as the red menace. Communists too entered the spirit of compromise, explaining that May Day was being celebrated on Sunday, 2 May because "the slogan this year is not 'Down Tools for May Day,' but 'Everything for the Offensive.'" Other speakers made sure labour's

particular interests were not ignored. Fair wages, control over inflation, and strict controls over war-profiteering were singled out as compelling issues for workers. Workers from the Boilermakers, Dock and Shipyard Workers, International Woodworkers of America (IWA), Fishermen, Steelworkers, Engineers, Hotel and Restaurant Employees, Street Railwaymen, and Firemen's unions were all in attendance. Women workers from Boeing wore red sweaters to signal their demands for rest periods and their protest over the government-ordered plant closure, while others donned red hair ribbons, purses, and shoes.³⁴

May Days in 1944 and 1945 were similar in their emphasis on cooperation between labour, business, and government. In both years, labour held its celebration on the Sunday before 1 May to underscore its commitment to the war effort. With the end of the war in sight, however, more attention was paid to what the peace would look like. CCF MLA Dorothy Steeves told listeners at Brockton Point in 1944 that "it was for labor to decide whether we shall return to the law of jungle or to man's humanity to man, whether black, red, yellow or white. Let labor get wise to itself and realize that peace can only be achieved by making over the system that makes war." Labour's political concerns once more became the critical point of May Day.³⁵

With the end of the war in 1945, workers made it clear that they would not return to the status quo of the 1930s. Enabled by the labour legislation of the war years, they joined unions in increasing numbers and engaged in more strike activity. 17,000 autoworkers walked off the job at the Ford plant in Windsor, Ontario, in September 1945 in a strike that lasted four months and was resolved with the creation of the famous Rand

³⁴ *Vancouver Sun*, 26 April 1943, 1 May 1943, 3 May 1943

³⁵ *Vancouver Sun*, 1 May 1944; 27 April 1945

formula. Members of the International Typographical Union struck newspapers in Vancouver, Edmonton, Winnipeg, Hamilton, and Ottawa. In BC, loggers and mill workers in the IWA launched a 6-week strike in May 1946; Steelworkers and meatcutters won important demands through national strikes.

Thus Vancouver's first May Day after World War II took on a different tone. It was celebrated on 1 May, a Wednesday, rather than the Sunday that had been taken during the war, and this marked a return to the work stoppage as an important part of May Day. The speeches and floats stressed "labor's current fight for the 40-hour week and higher wages" and noted that the 8-hour day was still a goal to be won on the "Diamond Jubilee" of the 1886 campaign. Mackenzie King's government was pilloried for its failure to deliver better living standards for Canadians, and the thousands at the rally loudly supported a resolution to have the government declare May Day a public holiday. In Victoria, the city council had declared a half-day holiday, and workers took advantage of it to hold a parade and rally. Banners called for the 40-hour week, wage increases, and the extension of the "franchise to East Indians." Sointula, Nanaimo, and Michels all had large celebrations as well, and each emphasized the necessity of unity to secure political gains and the promises made to Canadians by their government. The war had been won; the struggle now, many agreed, was to win the peace.³⁶

Instead, workers were now faced with a new war—the Cold War. By 1947, the *Vancouver Sun* was again describing May Day as "Europe's Labor Day," with pointed references to the military hardware paraded in Moscow and the observation of the day by "many countries which have veered to the left since the war." The May Day committee's application for a permit to follow its traditional route and lay a wreath at the cenotaph

³⁶ *Vancouver Sun*, 26 April 1946, 1 May 1946; *Pacific Tribune*, 3 May 1946; 10 May 1946

was banned by Vancouver's traffic committee, first on the grounds that it would interfere with business and then, when merchants made it clear they did not object to the parade, on the grounds that it would disrupt traffic. For its part, instead of uniting with business and state, the labour movement celebrated May Day with a show of unity between the craft unions in the Trades and Labour Congress (TLC) and the industrial, often left-leaning unions of the Canadian Congress of Labour (CCL). "The time has come," a TLC spokesman told the rally at Brockton Point, "for all unions to have but one affiliation." The day also highlighted the rising cost of living, and speakers called for the re-establishment of price controls and for support for a consumers' buying strike organized by the BC Housewives' Consumers' Association to drive down prices. They were joined by a new force: young boys and girls who took up placards and banners to protest the price increase of chocolate bars. The protests spread across the country as children used the tactics learned from the labour movement to try to roll back the price from 8 cents to a nickel. While the candy strike of 1947 was treated as a source of humour, it demonstrated how far labour's concerns and strategies had filtered into the popular imagination. This was behind the suggestion of one newspaper that the candy strike was instigated by Communists to plant "the seeds of Marxism." In any case, the young strikers were welcome at Vancouver's May Day. Their demands were heard beside the more pressing political ones for a bill of rights to safeguard civil liberties and for the repeal of BC's provincial labour legislation, Bill 39, the Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act, widely regarded as an attempt to interfere with collective bargaining and workers' ability to choose their own union.³⁷

³⁷ *Pacific Tribune*, 25 April; *Vancouver Sun*, 1 May 1947, 2 May 1947, 3 May 1947, 5 May 1947

Protest against Bill 39 was a central issue for the 1948 May Day activities. At Nanaimo, IWA leader Harold Pritchett, denounced the legislation at a large rally. Legislation, notably the LaCroix Act, federal legislation that sought to ban the Communist Party and similar organizations, was also a focal point of Vancouver's rally. There May Day participants demanded that governments address questions of industrial safety and explicitly took up the theme of world peace for the first time. The day evolved yet again to reflect the local and global political concerns of workers on a day of protest and celebration.³⁸

By 1948, however, CCF supporters, and Communists were fighting with each other in BC's unions and labour federations. Harold Pritchett and other BC labour leaders with Communist ties were purged from leadership positions, while Communists denounced CCF unionists as divisive and conservative. This internecine battle was an echo of the larger one being played out around the world. Social democratic parties and Communist parties increasingly lined up on different sides as the world split up into the two camps of the Cold War. In Vancouver, CCF candidate and secretary of the VTLC J.C. Bury sent out a call for a May Day celebration to be held in Pender Auditorium, "geared to full support of the CCF." Bury decried the traditional May Day celebrations as having become "little more than a medium for the Labor-Progressive [Communist] party, costly to the labor movement." Despite the attempt to hive off support, more than 5,000 people attended the May Day parade and Stanley Park rally, postponed to 8 May due to bad weather. It was largely organized by the Communist Party and those unions in which it still had a strong presence, such as the Canadian Seamen's Union, the Boilermakers, the Woodworkers Industrial Union, formed after the CP was purged from the IWA, the

³⁸ *Vancouver Sun*, 1 May 1948, 3 May 1948; *Pacific Tribune*, 7 May 1948

Fishermen's union, and the Longshoremen's union. A hint of the evolutionary changes in the economy and the labour movement was given by the inclusion of a float by the Vancouver Outside Civic Workers. The first time the union had prepared a May Day float, it signaled that government employees would soon become an important force in the economy and the labour movement as the state expanded its role in Canadian society.³⁹

The CP and its unions, especially the Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers Union, headed in BC by Harvey Murphy, were pressed hard by CCF unions such as the Steelworkers that set out to raid them. The split in the labour movement was likely responsible for a smaller May Day turnout in Vancouver in 1950. Murphy denounced the CCF as "union splitters" while other speakers emphasized the danger of war in the atomic age. But May Day would not be ceded to the CP. The Canadian writer Mary Elizabeth Colman wrote a lengthy article on May Day for the *Vancouver Sun* in which she carefully distinguished between the origins of the day of workers' protest and its later identification with Communist parties around the world. The essay pointed out that May Day had been created by workers of many different political stripes, but "Communist leaders quickly seized upon it." The Second International that had proclaimed May Day in 1889 "was not a Communist body," she reminded readers, and she stressed that 1 May should be a more ecumenical celebration for all workers. This argument reflected the relative strength of the CCF unions as they sought to distinguish themselves from the Communists. Reclaiming May Day from the Communists was one way to signal that the CCF was an important political force in the labour movement.⁴⁰

³⁹ *Pacific Tribune* 22 April 1949, 29 April 1949, 6 May 1949, 13 May 1949

⁴⁰ *Pacific Tribune*, 21 April 1950, 28 April 1950, 5 May 1950; *Vancouver Sun*, 29 April 1950, 1 May 1950

The CCF could not, however, establish its own May Day yet. In 1951, the day was still dominated by the CP and affiliated unions and organizations. It was identified in the press as "the Communist May Day Rally," and for the first time in years, it was harassed by the police, who seized collection tins and held two women for questioning. 1,000 people marched and several floats "denounced war atom bombs" as they made their way to Stanley Park to hear speeches by "Red leader Harvey Murphy" and others. The following year, May Day was again harassed by the police who broke the parade in two and sent part of it along a different route to Lumberman's Arch. Perhaps the most famous government intervention in this period was refusal of the American government to allow the left-wing African-American singer Paul Robeson to perform in Canada. Invited to sing at the Canadian convention of the Mine, Mill, and Smelterworkers' Union, Robeson was forced to surrender his passport to the US government and was forbidden to leave the country. The union and others quickly organized a concert held at the Peace Arch in Blaine, Washington, where on 18 May 1952, Robeson, standing on a flatbed truck just inside the US border, sang to a crowd of thousands on both sides of the international boundary.⁴¹

May Day during the Cold War a far cry from the triumphant marches of earlier years. In 1953, May Day received very little attention in the press; a brief article suggests that a parade and rally were organized by trade unionists and activists outside the Communist Party.⁴² Like the previous three years, this May Day was not held on 1 May; instead, it was held on the Sunday following it, as labour again adapted to circumstances and possibilities. Political division and repression had split the labour movement. The

⁴¹ *Vancouver Sun*, 30 April 1951; *Vancouver Sun*, 5 May 1952

⁴² *Vancouver Sun*, 2 May 1953

industrial relations regime that began with PC 1003 both legitimized and incorporated the labour movement, giving it some room to express grievances and negotiate better wages while safely containing protest within the system. It appeared that labour was recognized as a rightful, if very junior partner, with business and government, and that there was no longer a need to assert its strength independently. Indeed, over the next few years, there is little press coverage of May Day celebrations held by BC workers, and the day seems to have lost much of its significance locally. No doubt it seemed unnecessary now that certain rights to organize and bargain were protected by law. At the same time, a relatively healthy economy, government policy that made full employment a priority, and the development of social welfare, ensured that many, if not all, Canadians had a much better standard of living. Labour's bitter battles of the depression and the strike waves of the 1940s had paid off.

May Day was still an important day of protest internationally, and was used by both sides in the Cold War. Communist countries paraded troops, tanks, and missiles in a show of strength, while the "West" pictured such parades as proof of their aggressive nature. On both sides of the Berlin wall, people massed in demonstration and counter-demonstration. In Portugal, anti-government protestors fought with police after May Day demonstrations were banned by the dictator Salazar. May Day also became a day to protest American foreign policy. In 1960, Japanese demonstrators marched and hanged effigies of President Eisenhower to protest the signing of a US-Japan security treaty, and the following year demonstrated against US nuclear tests. By 1965, May Day in Vancouver raised similar political concerns. A rally of about 600 people passed motions opposing the escalation of the war in Viet Nam and supporting the civil rights movement

in the US. Sponsored by five local unions, the rally was held at the Queen Elizabeth Playhouse and emphasized the need for labour unions to work with other groups. "Racial discrimination and oppressive labor practices often go together," a speaker stressed. "Unions and civil rights groups have many similarities in fighting constantly for human welfare and economic freedom."⁴³

The following year, the war in Viet Nam became the most prominent target of May Day protests around the world as millions took to the streets in opposition to its escalation. In 1967, Vancouver started organizing the Easter be-in at Stanley Park. Part political demonstration, part peace rally, part spring celebration, the be-in signified the new waves of protest and opposition that characterized "the sixties," though often with little reference to labour. Labour was making its voice heard in other ways, notably through illegal, or wild-cat, strikes, particularly by government workers. If May Day had been a symbol of the power of the work stoppage, workers put aside the symbol for the reality to win the right to unionize and strike in the civil service and to show their dissatisfaction with routinized, alienating jobs.

By 1971, labour's May Day rally attracted only about 150 people to the Vancouver Labour temple on the evening of 30 April. If it lacked numbers, it showed some of the militancy of earlier demonstrations. Vancouver and District Labour Council and IWA local president Syd Thompson spoke to the issue of unemployment. The growth of the post-war era was slowing, and unemployment was rising. Annual rates of unemployment were often between 3 and 5% in the growth years; by the 1970s, they would increase to 7% and more. Thompson warned that Canadians were "only a stone's throw away from the relief camps we knew in the 1930s." Thompson spoke with some

⁴³ *Vancouver Sun*, 2 May 1960, 1 May 1962, 3 May 1965.

authority, as he had been in the camps and in the struggle for work and wages. Thompson then denounced the plan of the BC forest industry to use federal government money to create forest camps for students. "They propose hard work for these young fellows at a nominal wage, and considering the current inflation, that won't be much more than the 20 cents a day they used to pay in the 30s," Thompson stated. Other speakers highlighted unemployment, while Bill Stewart of the Boilermakers union recalled past May Days that saw thousands turn out for the parades and rallies. "But with the affluence we've had in Vancouver after the war, militancy has died down," he concluded. Vancouver alderman Harry Rankin, on the other hand, hoped that the small gathering "is the start of something. Next year, I hope we'll see 10,000 march in the streets of Vancouver."⁴⁴

Rankin was optimistic, but 1972 did see a more extensive May Day protest held at the Vancouver city hall on Monday, 1 May. Harry Greene, Canadian Union of Public Employees' (CUPE) vice-president, urged workers to continue protesting "until the Sacred government and its anti-labor legislation are removed from the scene." Jack Nichol of the United Fishermen and Allied Workers' Union (UFAWU) called upon trade unions to become united against management and government, as May Day again became a day for labour to make its political demands heard.⁴⁵

The combination of high unemployment and inflation that characterized the 1970s, sometimes called stagflation, prompted many governments and business to control wages and to cut social programs. By the 1980s, it was clear that the post-war settlement and the industrial relations regime, typified in Canada by PC 1003, were being dismantled, as governments implemented wage controls, took away the right of public

⁴⁴ *Vancouver Sun* 1 May 1971

⁴⁵ *Vancouver Sun* 1 May 1972

employees to strike, increasingly used back-to-work legislation, and imposed wage settlements. This in turn prompted new responses from the labour movement in Canada and abroad. Three million British workers refused to work on 1 May 1973 to show their opposition to government wage controls. The work stoppage marked a change from the first May Day of 1890, when British workers preferred to avoid direct confrontation with the state and had postponed their celebration until Sunday 4 May. Eighty-three years later, they were prepared to strike to make their point. While a Vancouver newspaper noted that May Day was "labor's traditional holiday everywhere but in the United States and Canada," the following year, North American workers proved them wrong. Washington state longshoremen stopped work on May Day to protest rising prices, while electrical workers, teamsters, and janitors struck for higher wages. More than 30,000 Quebec workers walked off the job on 1 May in opposition to the high cost of living and marched through the streets of the city to rally at Lafontaine Park, showing that North American workers too could consider 1 May their holiday.⁴⁶

1976 also saw Canadian workers take part in a national "Day of Protest" against the Trudeau government's implementation of wage controls. On 14 October, as many as one million workers stayed off the job. The increased militancy of the labour movement was demonstrated at the following May Day that saw about 7,500 Montreal workers march through the city, calling for day care and an end to wage controls. In Vancouver, a rally supported several political resolutions, included a call for the resignation of the federal finance minister for his failure to deal with rising unemployment. Other resolutions called for job training programs, housing construction programs, and, in an

⁴⁶ *Vancouver Sun* 1 May 1973, 2 May 1974. See Leo Panitch and Donald Swartz, *From Consent to Coercion: The Assault on Trade Union Freedoms*. 3rd edition. Aurora, Ontario: Garamond Press, 2003

echo of the 1930s, jobs paid at union rates. Sponsored by the Vancouver Trade Union May Day Committee, the rally included music and speakers from the New Democratic Party (NDP), the Communist Party, and the BC Federation of Labour.⁴⁷

That Canadian workers were becoming more militant was not lost on the authorities. Airborne troops decked out in riot gear, including helmets, shields, and 4-foot batons, took part in a riot control exercise around May Day in 1976. The staged exercise was a protest against the closing of a factory, and the troops were to prevent "rioters" from breaking into the mock-up of the factory. The military exercise soon got out of hand, however, as the troops "went squirrely," in the words of one role-playing rioter, and inflicted injuries on some of the participants. The timing of the exercise and the scenario of workers' protest for which the troops were training both indicate that the significance of May Day as a day of workers' protest had not escaped the authorities.⁴⁸

Now recognized in the press as "the international workers' holiday," May Day 1978 saw two rallies in Vancouver, both held on Sunday, 30 April. The first was explicitly a labour event, as a new Labour Memorial Committee laid a gravestone on the unmarked grave of Frank Rogers, a union organizer killed by thugs in the employ of the Canadian Pacific Railway during a strike in 1903. The committee included members of the UFAWU and the BC Teachers' Federation, a combination that indicated the growing diversity of the labour movement. At the same time that the labour movement commemorated its past, speakers addressed the political needs of the present. George Johnston, the president of the BC Federation of Labour, brought a small crowd of about 400 to their feet when he deplored the high unemployment rate.

⁴⁷ *Vancouver Sun*, 2 May 1977

⁴⁸ *Vancouver Sun*, 1 May 1976

Meanwhile, at Stanley Park, another celebration marked the political import of May Day as the Anarchist Party of BC (Groucho Marxist) organized a day of music and festivities. Just as the early labour movement had asserted May Day without requesting permission, the anarchists refused to seek a permit for their celebration. Political concerns were raised in two ways: first, through speeches attacking US nuclear submarine policy and second, through a pie vote that encouraged people to throw cream pies at masks of Prime Minister Trudeau, US President Jimmy Carter, and a pig that represented "all the other pigs." The guerrilla theatre was a new twist on labour's tactics that had used effigies and floats to make their point, and its combination of serious political issues with joyful celebration captured the spirit of early May Day protests.⁴⁹

Opposition to war and to the arms race had been part of May Day celebrations since the 1930s. By the 1980s, it often formed the core of Vancouver's spring protest. Thousands took part in May Day peace marches that criticized US policy and Canada's complicity with it. May Day in Communist countries took on a new meaning as well. Long an official holiday in the so-called workers' states, by 1982 May Day symbolized the revolt of workers against the state. The Polish Solidarity movement reinterpreted the traditional holiday to launch its demand against the government. In BC that year, 800 people marched to protest the restraint program launched by Bill Bennett's Social Credit government. BC Federation of Labour President Jim Kinnaird announced that labour "will not accept wage controls under any circumstances," drawing attention both to the Social Credit program and to the federal Liberals, who had raised interest rates and allowed unemployment to rise in order to combat inflation. Other speakers and marchers

⁴⁹ *Vancouver Sun*, 1 May 1978

criticized US foreign policy and racism, and declared their support for women's and native rights.⁵⁰

Vancouver's May Day continued to grow as workers intensified their political pressure. With unemployment ranging between 12 and 16 per cent, the 1983 march saw about 1,500 people gather at Robson Square before parading to Stanley Park to call for jobs and cuts to arms spending. "If the capitalist system is working, how come I'm not?" read one sign; "Refuse the Cruise," a reference to cruise missile testing, read another. These political concerns were also taken up by demonstrators in Calgary, Ottawa, Toronto, and Montreal who marched on May Day. But it was in British Columbia that labour protest would grow dramatically in 1983. After winning the provincial election in May 1983, the Social Credit government unleashed 26 bills on 7 July that ended public sector collective bargaining, dismantled boards that protected human rights, and cut social services. On 23 July, 25,000 marched in a Vancouver demonstration; four days later, 25,000 marched in Victoria. On 10 August, 50,000 rallied in Empire Stadium and dozens of other demonstrations took place around the province. The overt struggle ended in November, but Operation Solidarity, borrowing its name from the Polish workers' organization, was proof that workers near the end of the twentieth century would continue to use the political tactics and strategies of mass mobilization pioneered in earlier fights.⁵¹

That historical link was made explicit at the May Day celebration of 1985 when Bob "Doc" Savage, one of the On to Ottawa Trekkers who met with R.B. Bennett in 1935, addressed the rally under a banner that read "May Day '85—Organize! Mobilize

⁵⁰ *Vancouver Sun*, 1 May 1982, 3 May 1982

⁵¹ *Vancouver Sun*, 2 May 1983. A strike at Pacific Press in 1984 shut down the newspapers from 29 March to 23 May 1984 and so there is no daily press account of May Day for that year.

for Jobs." "When I see the TV today and I see the people lining up for food and for second-hand clothes," Savage said, "I see myself back in the '30s. The slogan is still the same. We want work and wages." BC Federation of Labour president Art Kube reminded the crowd that "for workers and the underprivileged, it's always a fight and a struggle for every little thing we get, be it on the picket line or in the political arena." Kube made references to the fight for the 8-hour in the 1880s to conclude that "we can use the celebration of May Day to strengthen ourselves and unite to conquer unemployment and poverty." Earlier that day protestors led by Jim Sinclair, who would become president of the BC Federation of Labour some years later, marched to the US consulate to demonstrate against American intervention in Nicaragua, while others used the day to oppose unemployment insurance cuts. The headline from the *Vancouver Sun* made the historical links clear: "Old cries for justice still concern workers" ninety-nine years after the first 1 May strike for the 8-hour day.⁵²

The importance of the work stoppage as a form of political action had not been forgotten. On 1 June 1987, 300,000 BC workers staged a one-day general strike to protest anti-labour legislation passed by the province. The spirit of May Day as a day to assert, without official approval, labour's political strength and its political demands, was obvious even though the timing was changed for tactical reasons.

While Vancouver's largest political celebrations around May Day were, by the 1980s, usually characterized as peace marches, they still represented the political demands of workers, who do not cease to be workers when they march to end war. The peace march evolved directly from labour's May Day marches and leaders and marchers alike came from the ranks of the labour movement. The president of the 1988 End the

⁵² *Vancouver Sun*, 2 May 1985

Arms Race march, for example, was Frank Kennedy, a long-time labour leader, and union banners were as obvious as peace placards. Speakers continued to link peace with other social issues. Libby Davies, then a Vancouver alderperson and later an NDP MP, called upon BC premier Bill Vander Zalm to "stop attacking single parents and children on welfare," and pointed out that instead of cutting social programs, governments could save money by refusing to purchase nuclear weapons.⁵³

At the same time, the labour movement was instrumental in the creation of Mayworks, an annual festival that brought together unions, artists, and the community to, as one year's program put it, "reclaim May Day as a day to recognize the ongoing struggle of workers for their rights, decent wages and working conditions - and for working class power."⁵⁴ Never fixed in its meaning or its form, May Day had evolved once more. Yet the day still retained its symbolic importance as a day for workers. Mayworks stressed the connections to art, community, and labour, and activists seized the day to make themselves heard. In 1990, for example, about 100 protestors assembled at Vancouver city hall on 1 May to fight for affordable housing.⁵⁵

World events cast international May Day in a different light. The official 1 May parades in Communist countries became contested events as protestors staged counter-demonstrations and rallies to demand workers' rights and political freedom. With the fall of the Soviet Union, May Day also became a day for those most adversely affected by the collapse to protest against the policies of the Yeltsin government. In Vancouver, the end of the Cold War meant that the peace movement had lost some of its urgency, and numbers at the annual march declined. The election of an NDP government in BC gave

⁵³ *Vancouver Sun* 25 April 1988

⁵⁴ <http://users.resist.ca/~mayworks/2000/>, downloaded 6 May 2005

⁵⁵ *Vancouver Sun*, 2 May 1990

May Day protest an ironic twist: in 1993, the Victoria Chamber of Commerce organized employers in a rally to complain about tax increases and to call upon the government to "Kick people off welfare now." Roy Peterson, the *Vancouver Sun* cartoonist, captured the irony in a sketch captioned "May Day at the BC Legislature." He fashioned the NDP premier, Michael Harcourt, and the finance minister, Glen Clark, as Soviet leaders surrounded on the May Day viewing stand surrounded by stodgy politburo members. Looking down on placards calling for tax revolts and the recall of the government, Harcourt commented, "Hmm...seems to be fewer NDP supporters down there this year." "Relax, Citizen Boss," replied Clark, "they're all up here...on the payroll." The joke worked because the tropes and meanings of May Day were long established and so could be inverted for comic effect. At the same time, others still took the day as a day of workers' protest. On 1 May 1993, about 100 people marched on Vancouver's Commercial Drive to support the Justice for Janitors campaign launched by the Service Employees International Union and to call for May Day to be a paid holiday. Other activists took leaves of absence to join caravans that left from the west and east coasts to converge on Ottawa to protest the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Consciously drawing parallels with the On to Ottawa Trek, the caravans included social activists such as Jean Swanson and Ellen Woodsworth, granddaughter of J.S. Woodsworth, and labour figures such as Art Kube.⁵⁶

May Day in 1995 brought together about 200 people to protest against the federal budget brought down by Paul Martin. Led by John Fitzpatrick of the Vancouver and District Labour Council, several labour organizations, including the Confederation of Canadian Unions, the Public Service Alliance of Canada, the BC Government and

⁵⁶ *Vancouver Sun*, 1 May 1993

Service Employees' Union, and the Iron Workers, were joined by the National Action Committee on the Status of Women, the Canadian Federation of Students, and End Legislated Poverty in a march from Clark Park to Grandview Park to fight the cuts to employment insurance and other social welfare programs.⁵⁷

This alliance of labour and other movements would continue to develop and to shape protest in the 1990s, most dramatically at the "Battle in Seattle" in 1999 that saw trade unionists, environmentalists, students, and others unite in five days of demonstrations against globalization and the World Trade Organization. In Vancouver the following year, activists organized a May Day parade across the Burrard Street bridge into the downtown and a "Carnival against Capitalism." Organized primarily by the BC Federation of Labour and its affiliated unions, End the Arms Race, and the Council of Canadians, the parade stopped at a Starbucks store to give its support to the Canadian Autoworkers' union, which was organizing employees at the coffee chain. The labour movement also gave funding to the organizers of the Carnival against Capitalism, which combined May Day festivities with a celebration of the gains won by workers and the anti-globalization protest sparked by Seattle. Both demonstrations took aim at sweat shops, the steady cutbacks to social programs, and globalization. Just as earlier generations had asserted their right to protest without the permission of the government or employers by taking 1 May off, young activists in 2000 insisted that "we'll be reclaiming the streets. We have a right to be there as much as the cars do."⁵⁸

As protests around the world against globalization became more aggressive, police increasingly reacted with force. In Vancouver, demonstrators against the Asia-

⁵⁷ *Vancouver Sun*, 1 May 1995

⁵⁸ *Vancouver Sun*, 28 April 2000, 1 May 2000, 2 May 2000

Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit were pepper-sprayed and arrested in 1997; four years later, May Day marchers were subjected to the same treatment. Similar protests and reactions broke out in Milan, Quebec City, Gothenburg, Calgary, and Kananaskis. In 2002, May Day in Vancouver was celebrated by a rally held by the Anti-Poverty Committee. Starting at Victory Square, demonstrators marched to a McDonald's restaurant to protest the \$6 an hour "training wage" legislated by the provincial government. "Big business invested millions of dollars in the Liberal [provincial] campaign," one of the organizers pointed out. "These same rich business owners make millions by paying starvation wages to the people who work for them." The political point of the protest, however, was lost when instead of dispersing peacefully, some demonstrators entered Pacific Centre Mall and smashed windows and showcases. The *Vancouver Sun* editorialized against "that outdated left-wing shibboleth, May Day 'celebrations,'" and complained about the links to "the usual organizations and labour unions."⁵⁹

Despite the disapproval of the press, May Day would remain a day of protest in Vancouver. In 2004, 5,000 demonstrators marched in the biggest 1 May celebration in several years to protest the provincial Liberal government and to support striking members of the Hospital Employees' Union. It was clear that May Day continued to resonate as a day for demonstrations and political action in the opening years of the twenty-first century, more than 100 years after the first march for the 8-day and the call for an international workers' day. It has changed over time and according to circumstances. When labour was strong and militant, workers stopped work, even advancing or postponing the day of celebration from 1 May so the demonstration would

⁵⁹ *Vancouver Sun*, 2 May 2002, 3 May 2002

take place during the work week. When labour was weak or did not want confrontation, the celebration might shift to the week-end. The issues would change, from shorter hours to work and wages to peace to the defence of social programs. The participants might fill the streets in some years, while in others they would be hard-pressed to fill an auditorium; they might be welcomed as symbolic of labour contribution to society or blasted as Bolsheviks, Communists, and anarchists. Labour's potential as an agent for progressive social change has ebbed and flowed according to social and economic conditions. May Day, however, has been a rallying point and a demonstration of labour's political aspirations since it was first asserted in 1886.