



TOWARDS MAY DAY, 1904.

**Specially contributed to the May Day issue of "The Socialist" by
DANIEL DE LEON, Editor of the New York "Daily People."**

It was at the International Socialist Congress, held at Zurich in 1893. The delegates, that is, most of them, were swaying under the breath of an entrancing debate. It was the debate on "May Day." Austria spoke; Germany spoke; Sweden spoke; of course, England spoke, very much so; many other nations spoke, Italy among them. America and Australia, seated close together, spake not: the two looked and listened on, and exchanged whispers. The Zurich Ton-Halle rang with the florid oratory concerning May—the month of flowers, and therefore, the fit month for the universal Feast of Labour. Such was the harping upon the floridity of May, that, had the Congress been held in America, and an American, not a Continental audience, filled the lobbies, ten to one it would have fallen to hum the tune, and presently struck up the song in Gilbert and Sullivan's "Mikado"—"The flowers that bloom in the spring, tra la!" The debate ended; the motion was carried; all nations were to celebrate the Feast of Labour on one day—May Day—the month of flowers. When the applause subsided that greeted the announcement of the vote, the delegate from Australia rose, and in accents that were "child-like and bland," informed the Congress that, where he came from in Australia, snow-balls and not flowers blossomed in May. The unsung refrain of Gilbert and Sullivan's operette was completed: the flowers that bloom in the spring—"had nothing to do with the case." The Australian's remarks were the weightiest of all the remarks made in the Congress.

The idea of May Day rose, not from the fragrancy of the fields, but from the sooty, dusty and suffocating atmosphere of the shop, the mine, the yard. As its source was cramped, so was its aim; and its aim, reached through the pervading soot, dust and steam, could not choose but partake of the limitations of its own source. The aim was the EIGHT HOUR DAY—then, and even now, in some quarters, looked upon as a panacea, the real millennium. Even among those who aimed further, the idea was prevalent that the Eight Hour Day would be “a long step forward,” and while realizing the limitations of the step, encouraged, at least did not oppose, the millennial expectations, and boomed May Day—a serious tactical blunder.

Taking America for my field of observation—and a pace-setting field it is—the experience made with the Eight Hour Day Movement was in line with the experience made before with all moves, which, while theoretically and temporarily affording relief, in the end leave matters where they were, aye, worse than they were before—unless—*unless*, simultaneously, while standing for the temporary reliefs, the fact of the relief being only temporary, the fact and the reason why it can only be temporary, is emphasized and held up clear as a pike; in other words, unless that compound of sentimentalism and visionariness—fatedly disastrous to such a mass-movement like the Labour or Socialist Movement is inherently—consisting in the false policy of jollyng the masses and believing that they can be emancipated from wage slavery without their knowledge—is bade adieu for all time. The uniform experience has been that the jollyers are themselves jollied, are themselves swallowed up, lose their bearings, and finally adjust themselves to their failure and became fakirs, seeking to make out that failure is success.

The tangible result of the Eight Hour Day wave in America has been the following sequence: First, improved machinery, whereby the employer could, with fewer hands than before, turn out more work, thereby knocking out the calculation that the Eight Hour Day would absorb the previous unemployed; second, more fitful employment and, consequently, reduced earnings, though not always reduced wages; third, intenser, more life-tissue, marrow and brain-matter-consuming toil; fourth, increased mortality, admitted to be appalling in some trades, the linotype compositor among others; and fifth, and as the grand climax of it all, the setting in

of conditions that have given birth to the ghastly proverb: "If a working man reaches 42 years of age take him out and shoot him: he is too played out to be of use to an employer, and too poor to keep himself." Not more than three years ago, and reporting to his government upon the machinists' trade, the British Consul at Chicago stated that if a machinist was 42 years old and out of work, it was hard for him to find employment, because, if he worked as hard as he was expected to, he was a wreck at 42, and if he was not that, then it was a proof he did not work as hard as he should, and no employer would have him. To all this must be added the state of ignorance that the men are now left in—thanks to delusion or the jollyers or "borers from within" and their subsequent dishonesty.

The original May Day expectations failed to materialize, but the May Day celebrations remained. Shall the pursuit of one species of "flowers that bloom in the spring," and that hard reality proved to be "snow-balls that riot in winter," be succeeded by the pursuit of another set of "flowers" also destined to turn out but chilly "snow-balls?" If the policy of the jollyers prevails that is what will happen. It is a feature of their policy to need big crowds; small crowds chill them; they know themselves so well that it needs a big crowd to steady their knees. Seeing that larger crowds can be attracted by nonsense than by sense, they talk "flowers that bloom in the spring." In short, the jollyer is no builder. He is barnyard cattle, that follow the sunshine round the haystack while they feed.

The Socialist or Labour Movement of this day has inherited the May Day celebrations. In the language of our own American bard, Walt Whitman, "All the past we leave behind us, pioneers! Oh, pioneers!" To the internationality of May Day we couple, not the wild revolutionary or vapidly sentimental phrases that pass with the breath that utters them, but the deliberately drilling principles and sentiments that organise while they agitate and educate. These principles teach us of the Socialist {Labour} Party of America, that capitalism has solved the ambitious dreams of the men of old who sought after universal power. The Universal Empire now exists; its Emperor is the Capitalist Class, its vassals are the Working Class of the world. Drawn together into a common bond as common vassals, we commemorate on May Day the oneness of our status with our fellow wage slaves everywhere; enlightened by Socialist thought, we recognise in our common

vassalage the stepping-stone to the practice of the higher morality of the Brotherhood of Man; tutored by experience, we patiently, deliberately and unterrified, drive the sunken granite piers over which the bridge is to be laid for the triumphant march of the wage-slave to his emancipation: finally, with our feet on earth and not in the clouds, seeking to dupe none and allowing none to dupe us, we build on facts and not on fancy, on truth and not on trash.

The Socialist Labour Party of America believes that the universal Emperor, the Capitalist Class, has reared in America its citadel. In the trenches where we are encamped and at the work of cannonading the usurper's stronghold, we stop just long enough on May Day to join in the universal shout that goes up from the world's class-conscious proletariat; we bid them good cheer; we pledge to them our steadfastness; we assure them of our confidence in their intrepidity against their own section of the usurper's world-surrounding ramparts—and I, for one, avail myself of this opportunity afforded to me by the organ of the Socialist Labour Party of Great Britain, to extend to it sincere congratulations upon its birth, its progress and the yeoman's work, long neglected, that it is performing for the working class of its country.

DANIEL DE LEON.

NEW YORK, *April* 11, 1904.

Transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the official Web site of the Socialist Labor Party of America.

Uploaded June 2007

slpns@igc.org