

NO COMMON GROUND - workers and the WEF

The meeting of the World Economic Forum in New York City is nothing more than a Board of Directors meeting of Global Capital, Inc. to discuss how the world economic system can be best managed to maintain power, profit and privilege for those who have it. For those of us who are working people, homemakers, students and retirees, and for those who have the misfortune of being unemployed or homeless, there is nothing to be gained in this venture. Whatever great decisions they come up with, whatever they decide to do with the world economy, we will still be the ones on whose back the system operates.

Follow the leaders?

So if this is the case, then what are so-called labor "leaders" like AFL-CIO President John Sweeney and others doing inside the Forum, breaking bread with our enemies? Do they honestly think that they can persuade the assembled bosses to give us a few more crumbs, when what we should be fighting for is the whole pie? They may take part in protests and rallies outside the Forum, but by just being present inside, they help legitimate the whole sordid business.

The fact is that the "leaders" of the labor movement are quite comfortable with sharing the stage with corporate cutthroats and international manipulators. They see their ultimate interests as tied up with the success of global capitalism, as long as they can come back to us and say how they "won" us a little more justice and equity in the great scheme of things. But the fundamental relationships of power, profit and privilege remain unchanged, with us holding the short end of the stick.

Look at the recent "love affair" between Service Employees International Union Local 1199 President Dennis Rivera and Governor Pataki and his allies. Perhaps the health care workers of New York have gained something in the short run, but ultimately, by kowtowing to the party in power, the health care workers are left dependent on favors for their livelihood. No politician in the final analysis represents the interests of working people, but the people who Rivera has allied himself with are particularly known for their regressive, anti-worker policies. What the whole thing is really about is promoting the power and careers of "leaders" like Rivera rather than the interests of working people.

Their globalization and ours

Clearly we do need a global economy, but not the type we are living under today, even if we manage to get a few more bucks in our paychecks from it. We need an economy based on producing goods and services for use not profit, where the world's resources can be shared fairly and equitably among all. We need a truly new world order, one that transcends the competition of nation-states and their armies, so that the tragedy of September 11 and the violence that has followed from both sides may never happen again. We need unity in pursuit of our common interests but one that respects and nurtures diversity, not a "united world" based on the imposition of corporate commodity culture in every corner of the planet, as the WEF aims to impose.

The Workers Solidarity Alliance is an organization of men and women like yourselves who are fed up with the current order of things. We have a vision of a world human community without bosses or bureaucrats, where work is self-managed by the workers themselves and social organization is based on direct democracy. To achieve this vision we call for building a labor movement without professional leaders, organized across the false lines of trade, workplace, industry and nation, where we both fight for a better life today and for a new world tomorrow. We call this vision anarchist unionism or syndicalism, but the name is far less important than what it stands for.

We call on all workers to move forward from the rallies and protests outside the WEF to carry this struggle into our workplaces and communities, and to build the type of global movement that will serve our interests and the interests of society as a whole.

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RECLAIMING MAY DAY

May 1st, International Workers' Day, commemorates the historic struggle of working people throughout the world, and is recognized in nearly every country except the U.S. and Canada. This despite the fact that the holiday began in the 1880's in the U.S., with the fight for an 8-hour workday.

In 1884, the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions (predecessor of the American Federation of Labor) passed a resolution stating that 8 hours would constitute a legal day's work starting May 1, 1886. The resolution called for a general strike to achieve the goal, since legislative methods had already failed. With workers being forced to work 10, 12 and 14 hours a day, support for the 8-hour movement grew rapidly, despite the indifference and hostility of many union leaders. By April 1886, 250,000 workers were involved in the May Day 8-hour a day struggle.

The heart of the movement was in Chicago, Illinois, organized primarily by members of the anarchist International Working People's Association (IWPA). Businesses and the State were terrified by the increasingly revolutionary character of the movement and prepared accordingly. The police and militia were increased in size and received new and powerful weapons, including a machine gun for the National Guard to be used against the strikers. Nevertheless, by May 1st, the movement had already won gains for many Chicago workers. But on May 3, 1886, police fired into the crowd of strikers at the McCormick Reaper factory, killing 4 and wounding many. Anarchists call for a mass meeting the next day in Haymarket Square to protest police brutality (sound familiar?).

The meeting proceeded without incident, and by the time the last speaker was on the platform, the rainy gathering was already breaking up, with only a few hundred people remaining. It was then that 180 cops marched into the Square and ordered the meeting to disperse. As the speakers climbed down the platform, a bomb was thrown at the police, killing one and injuring seventy. Police responded by firing into the crowd, killing one worker and injuring many others.

Although it was never determined who threw the bomb, the incident was used as an excuse to attack the entire radical and labor movement. Police ransacked the homes and offices of suspected anarchists and radicals, and hundreds were arrested without charge. Anarchists in particular were harassed, and 8 of Chicago's most active were charged with conspiracy to murder in connection to the Haymarket bombing. A kangaroo court found all 8 guilty, despite a lack of evidence connecting any of them to the bomb-thrower, who was never caught. Only one of them was even at the rally at the time of the bombing. Five were sentenced to death. Albert Parsons, August Spies, Adolph Fischer and George Engel were hanged on November 11, 1887. Louis Lingg committed suicide in prison. The remaining 3 were finally pardoned in 1883.

It is not surprising that the state, business leaders, mainstream union officials and the media want to hide the true history of May Day, portraying it as a holiday only celebrated in North Korea. In an attempt to erase the history and significance of May Day, the US government, years ago, declared May 1st to be Law Day and gave us instead Labor Day -- a holiday devoid of any historical significance anywhere else in the world.

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Nevertheless, rather than suppressing labor and radical movements, the events of 1886 and the execution of the Chicago anarchists actually mobilized many generations of radicals, and continues to do so today. Emma Goldman later pointed to the Haymarket affair as her political birth. The Spanish National Confederation of Labor (CNT) has made the commemoration of the Chicago Martyrs a yearly event. Lucy Parsons, widow of Albert Parsons, called upon the poor to direct their anger at those responsible -- the rich. Instead of disappearing, the anarchist workers movement only grew in the wake of Haymarket, spawning other radical and anarchist movements and inspiring segments of the labor movement, including the Industrial Workers of the World, both here and abroad.

By covering up the history of May Day, the state, business, mainstream unions and the media have covered up the entire legacy of dissent and labor radicalism, particularly anarchist labor unionism, in the U.S. They are terrified of what a similarly militant and self-organized movement could accomplish today, and they attempt to suppress the seeds of such organization whenever and wherever they can. As workers, we must recognize and commemorate May Day not for historical significance, but also a time to organize around an issue of vital importance to working class people today.

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