

SOCIETY **LABOR ORGANIZING** **LABOR STRIKES**

Celebrating May Day Starts by Taking Workers Seriously

Here in the United States, workers need a lot more than another holiday.

By Jane McAlevey.

MAY 1, 2020



Members of the Greek Labour Union wear masks and respect social distance guidelines as they protest in front of the Greek Parliament. (Aris Messinis / AFP via Getty Images)

May 1 is an official public holiday in 66 countries, including most of Europe. Other than a couple of faith-based holidays and the start of the new year, there's hardly a holiday that spans so many nations. With its roots in ancient agrarian celebrations of spring, the official public holiday on May 1 is International Workers Day, celebrating the extraordinary contributions of workers and the working class. In countries where it's an official day off, and 100 other nations, it is often commemorated with marches, protests, or strikes.

But here in the United States, the date is barely known beyond those immigrants whose home countries honor it, or among the most committed labor activists. Yet May Day commemorates the lives of four labor organizers in the United States who were hanged in Chicago after being falsely convicted of throwing a bomb into a group of police.

The lead-up to what became known as the Haymarket Massacre was a call to shorten the workday with no pay cut. In 1884, the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions (precursor to the American Federation of Labor) voted at its annual convention that from May 1, 1886, onward, the workday would consist of eight hours. Thus on May 1, 1886, peaceful protests took place in many US cities, with hundreds of thousands walking off the job. In Chicago, a second consecutive day of action drew crowds to a steel mill that was the site of an ongoing labor dispute. When police attacked the protesters, two workers were killed and dozens injured. The organizers hastily called for people to take to the streets for a third day in the city's Haymarket Square to protest the killings. During this protest a bomb was thrown at the police. In the ensuing melee, seven police officers and at least four civilians were killed, with dozens of others wounded.

Diagnosing the problem as “an acute outbreak of anarchy,” *The New York Times* prescribed the application of “a Gatling gun” followed by “hemp, in judicious doses.” Eight organizers of the Haymarket Square protest were arrested, and despite no evidence to connect them to the bombing—several were not even in the square at the time—four were executed in August of 1886. A fifth defendant committed suicide before being hanged, and three others who were convicted were later fully exonerated and released from jail. The charges against the activists were obviously trumped up, intended to quell growing labor unrest in Chicago and the country at large.

Less than 10 years and several massive strikes later, President Grover Cleveland declared the first Monday in September as Labor Day, an action designed explicitly to sever the nation's working class from their counterparts across the globe, as well as give the appearance that the Democratic Party cared about workers while it was brutally

repressing strikes. With the exception of the May 1, 2006, the “Day Without an Immigrant”—arguably the biggest strike by labor in the United States in decades—International Workers Day has hardly registered here. This isn’t surprising: Despite the applause for health care workers whose employers are killing them by denying them personal protective equipment, workers and the working class are not valued in the United States. The rot of our democracy lies in the indignation with which the political elite casts aside the daily contributions of workers, both paid and unpaid. From housewives and mothers, rendered insignificant except for the unpaid, unofficial, Hallmark-card holiday called Mother’s Day, to immoral prison labor, to agricultural workers toiling in slave-like conditions in fields stretching from Deep South Louisiana to chic California to the verdant apple orchards of the Empire State, tens of millions had been exploited and uncompensated for a long time before a record 26.5 million Americans filed unemployment claims because of the pandemic.



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Amazon workers are being fired for standing up for their own health protection needs. Registered nurses are being fired for coming to work with a garbage bag covering their scrubs and posting the pictures on

social media on their own time, suggesting that their protective equipment is as good as trash bags. Then there's the outrageous series of federal bailouts designed to fatten the over-bulging pockets of CEOs and shareholders while intentionally starving workers of wages, health care, food, rent, heat, and any damned dignity at all. Mitch McConnell's musings—that he has no intention of helping local and state governments alleviate the crushing pain of millions of people being laid off, because the free market won't produce equipment or testing or do a goddamned thing to stop the devastation—makes it clear that the bailouts are also designed to be a cudgel, intentionally destroying public service workers' hard-earned pensions in the name of post-Covid austerity.

Recently passed federal policy, starting with the 2017 tax cut for the rich and ending with the pandemic's corporate bailouts, engorges the super rich by sucking the lifeblood from workers. Homelessness, car repossessions, and hunger are the reward for every bit of profit the workers have earned for the plutocrats in Silicon Valley and Wall Street. Thinking about May Day can feel revolting in the United States, where workers need a lot more than another holiday. Although, to be clear, many of the nation's workers get no holidays, no days off, no vacation, in addition to no health care, no homes, and no pension.

The number of unemployed workers is now reaching Great Depression levels. Meanwhile, the human misery index has long been reminiscent of the early 1930s—if less obvious to the cheery people at NPR's *Market Place*. They somehow—right up until Covid—consistently reported that the economy was doing fine and Wall Street was up, ignoring decades of massive underemployment, sinking wages; rising numbers of personal bankruptcies due to health problems; rising credit card debt; rising opioid addictions; and rising suicide rates.

The number that should be increasing is the one documenting strikes and the number of workers on strike over the past two years. Trump-appointed corporate lackeys have all but destroyed the National Labor Relations Board, the agency intended to protect workers' rights. After suspending unionization elections in the name of Covid when workers were desperate to unionize, then cynically restoring them to hold what

are called decertification elections (the process by which workers can vote out a union), the NLRB has left workers in the United States no real choice but to act as if they had an effective union. That means building supermajority support and walking off the job unless and until their demands are met.

This May Day, however—aside from conjuring up wishful images of workers all across this country striking for every bit of what's been taken from them—we need to dream bigger than securing personal protective equipment or hazard pay or sick pay during a pandemic. We need to begin strike plans for what we really need: Medicare for All, and an aggressively pro-union Green New Deal guaranteeing all workers in the current fossil fuel sector can keep their current union contracts, while enabling “essential” workers in low-carbon-emission sectors (home care and child care workers, those that harvest and deliver our food, etc.) to achieve new collective agreements as good as those in the energy sector. We need to plan strikes this fall, in 2021, 2022, and up to 2024, where solidarity pledges are signed by tens of millions of workers: “None of us go back until all of us achieve health care free at the point of service, national guaranteed sick leave, vacation leave, a just society and a functioning democracy.”

Every strike I've had the pleasure of helping to lead involved variations of solidarity pledges, which are literal, signed statements, public commitments organized work area by work area, shift by shift, so workers could wrestle up-front with the hard decisions to stay out longer for one another, and thus for all of us. The Supreme Court is gone for the foreseeable future, and the federal judiciary belongs to McConnell and Trump. As we have seen from Illinois to Wisconsin, the electoral system is broken to the point where, yes, there will be something called an election in November—but it won't be fair or free. It will be suppressed and stolen.

Strikes are the only tool left in the basket. Until we find our way to massive strikes, the country we once knew, problematic as it was, is done. Running highly effective strikes—what we need to reset this

country—is hard as hell, but everyone can learn. Besides, taking action together easily beats hunger, homelessness and a lifetime of illegitimate debt heaped upon us by people profiting as workers die.

This May Day, pledge to learn about strikes, about what it takes to build supermajority strikes, like those recently waged by the Los Angeles, Chicago, and West Virginia educators. They had nearly 100 percent participation, and serious spadework was done to build broad community support before the supermajorities ever walked off the job. This May Day, talk to someone you work with, live with, your next-door neighbor. Start a book group on how to hold an effective strike. Begin building groups to actively support workers who will be on strike. Via Skype or Zoom, from sidewalk to front porch, commit to the knowledge that with the courts gone, the press under assault, the wrecked Wisconsin election as a portent of the coming presidential election, the only salvation each of us have is one another.

Jane McAlevey Jane McAlevey is *The Nation's* strikes correspondent and the author of *A Collective Bargain: Unions, Organizing, and the Fight for Democracy*. She is a senior policy fellow at the University of California's Institute for Research on Labor and Employment.

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SPORTS **BASKETBALL** **RUSSIA**

Trevor Reed's Freedom Should Spur Calls to Release Brittney Griner

Griner's supporters should use the activism of Reed's parents as a road map.

By Dave Zirin



US ex-Marine Trevor Reed, charged with attacking police, stands inside a defendants' cage during his verdict hearing at Moscow's Golovinsky district court on July 30, 2020. (Photo by Dimitar Dillkoff / AFP via Getty Images)

Trevor Reed, a former US Marine, was detained in Russia for three years and served two years of a nine-year sentence, after being convicted on charges of endangering the “life and health” of Russian police officers. He has maintained his innocence, and his supporters, including the US government, have long classified his trial as a sham. Reed was given the chance at a reduced sentence if he pleaded guilty and instead said, “I would rather stay in prison an honest man than walk away tomorrow a liar and a coward.”

The State Department told his terrified parents, Paula and Joey Reed, to stay calm, keep quiet, and let the diplomatic experts do their jobs. But as the days turned to weeks, months, and years, their patience wore thin. Then, as Russia's invasion of Ukraine shredded diplomatic connections between the United States and Russia, and news emerged of their son's tuberculosis as well as an injury sustained in prison, the Reeds had had enough. They set up a website. They gave interviews. They even picketed the White House. Now, despite the current geopolitical hell and the rapid reimposition of the Cold War, Trevor Reed has been set free. Reed was finally released in a dramatic tarmac

plane swap after the Biden administration agreed to exchange him for Konstantin Yaroshenko, a Russian pilot who had been serving a 20-year federal prison sentence in Connecticut for conspiracy to smuggle cocaine.

The Trevor Reed story should focus our attention on another imprisoned US citizen in Russia, WNBA All-Star Brittney Griner, and indeed, judging by trending across social media, it has. Since mid-February, Griner has been detained in Russia awaiting a May 19 trial date where she faces 10 years behind bars—five years at hard labor—for the alleged crime of having hashish vape cartridges in her bag at the airport. With Reed's release, Griner's supporters want to know that she is next.

If you've been reading this space, you know that I believe we need to understand Griner as a political prisoner, partly because she has been paraded in front of Russian state media like some sort of six-foot-nine prize, partly because 10 years for allegedly having cannabis cartridges is obscene. Factor in that Griner is a Black queer woman in a country where national minorities and LGBTQ people have been victims of targeted harassment, and the urgency to secure her freedom only grows.

The State Department and the WNBA has preached silence in the hope that Griner would not become the kind of high-profile political prisoner Russia could use like a pawn on a chessboard. But that's wishful thinking. *Of course* Griner was always going to become a political prisoner. This was easier to predict than the success of an attempted Griner slam dunk. It is past time that supporters shed their silence and spoke out for her return. They only need take a cursory look at Trevor Reed's case and the activism of Reed's parents—done with one-millionth of Griner's cultural capital—to see that this could prove to be a positive approach—or at least more positive than doing nothing. The possibilities could be seen in how the release of Reed spurred a long-overdue public discussion about Griner. The State Department commented on the matter, with spokesperson Ned Price

saying to CNN, “When it comes to Brittney Griner, we are working very closely with her team. Her case is a top priority for us. We’re in regular contact with her team.”

One of the reasons or justifications much of the sports world has used for their silence regarding Griner has been that they were following the wishes of Griner’s wife, Cherelle, who asked for privacy and quiet. But on Wednesday, Cherelle broke her silence with a statement posted on Instagram, where she said

As I do everything in my power to get [Brittney] home, my heart is overflowing with joy for the Reed family. I do not personally know them, but I do know the pain of having your loved one detained in a foreign country. That level of pain is constant and can only be remedied by a safe return home. For the Reed family, that day is today. Welcome home Trevor, sending love to you and your family on this special day.

This heartbreaking, gracious statement should be seen as a cue to recognize that Griner’s best chance at freedom is not hoping for the benevolence of the Russian legal system or the stealth expertise of the State Department. It will be in our exercising whatever improbable back channel freed Trevor Reed and demanding that Brittney be freed.

Dave Zirin Dave Zirin is the sports editor of *The Nation* and the author of *The Kaepernick Effect: Taking a Knee, Changing the World*.

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