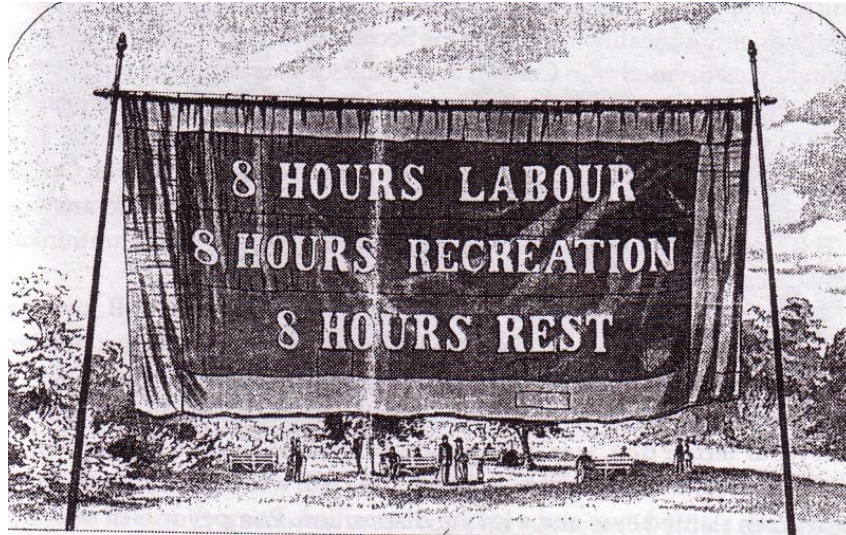


May Day: A Brief History



The origin of May Day in the United States dates to the struggle for the eight-hour day in the 1880s. In 1884, the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions (later to become the American Federation of Labor) proclaimed that “eight hours shall constitute a legal day’s labor from and after May 1, 1886.” On May 1, 1886, over 300,000 workers around the United States—40,000 in Chicago alone—laid down their tools and walked out in the fight for the eight-hour day. This was by far the most effective demonstration of working class solidarity that the nation had ever seen. Three days later, on May 4, 1886, the famous Haymarket bombing occurred in Chicago during a rally called to protest the killing of workers at the McCormick Reaper Works on the previous day. Seven policemen died from the bombing and untold workers were shot in retaliation. Eight people were accused of the bombing and four of them, later to be known as the Haymarket martyrs, were hanged. One of the workers committed suicide before being executed, and the three others were sentenced to jail, later to be pardoned on the basis that the trial was a mockery of justice.

In the years that ensued, many labor unions were successful in establishing the eight-hour work day, though the basic eight-hour work day/40-hour work week was not made into Federal law until the passage of the Fair Labor Standards Act in 1938 (44-hour work week) and then amended in 1940 (40-hour work week). A majority of American workers were not covered by the original FLSA, and other workers, among them domestic workers and supervisory workers, are not covered by it today.

International Workers’ Day, as May Day is known around the world, is celebrated as an official holiday in over 60 countries. However, in the United States, Labor Day, which falls on the first Monday of September, is the official holiday for workers in the United States.