

This First of May—Promise and Achievement

By Ludwig Lore

THOSE of us who only know the well-dressed, respectably innocuous first of May of recent years have no conception of the power and the impetus that it evoked when it was first proclaimed as the holiday of the world proletariat by the International Congress at Paris in 1889. The motion as adopted by the Congress, it is true, simply provided for demonstrations in favor of the 8 hour day and social legislation, leaving the form thereof demonstrations were to take to the national units of the Social-Democracy.

The first May Day found Germany in the midst of a tremendous political rejuvenation, the period immediately following upon the fall of the notorious Socialist exception laws. Early in 1890 the party had gone through an exciting Reichstag election campaign with flying colors. The intense agitation of the Socialist forces which had emerged from this period of enforced seclusion more determined than ever, and the virulent attacks of the Bismarck government parties, which frequently culminated in actual physical assaults upon Socialist agitators and workers had aroused a fever of interest all over the country. As a result of the election Bismarck, the originator of the anti-Socialist laws, was shortly afterward overthrown; the Social-Democratic movement of Germany had won a glorious victory.

The proposed holiday of labor found the Socialist movement, therefore, in no mood to temporize. Its success in the election had cowed the bourgeoisie, and hopes ran high. Not only the organized movement in the party and in the labor unions, but even its bitterest opponents felt that the day of reckoning was at hand. Even the most conservative leaders of the labor movement foresaw the realization of their ideals within a few short years. And their very confidence woke an answering fear in the hearts of their opponents. Already they seemed to hear the thunder of the coming revolution, and great, enthusiastic masses of organized labor rejoiced in the coming.

Such was the temper of labor especially in the larger cities, that few manufacturers dared to oppose the general holiday. Red flags flaunted their message in the face of a badly frightened bourgeoisie. The spirit that enthused the demonstrators in these first years lifted the First of May above the intent of its originators. It was more than merely a demonstration for social legislation and an 8 hour day. In the eyes of the proletariat it heralded the coming of the world revolution.

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But there came other May Days. Where first the refusal to work on May 1st had been the rule it became the exception. The leaders of the movement began to feel their "responsibilities," they warned here, they checked there, and shook their heads gravely over the younger element whose foolhardiness would get the party into trouble.

In Germany the labor unions particularly opposed the injection of such radical demonstrations into the amicable relations that had been established between the workers on the one hand and the manufacturers on the other. They feared for their treasuries and objected to the payment of black-list benefits to those comrades who were outlawed by the manufacturers because they celebrated the First of May. And the Party followed suit. It, too, began to put on the brakes. May First was "celebrated" in afternoon and evening demonstrations, and mostly in hall meetings.

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This was the "evolutionary," the reformist period of the Socialist movement. We have left it behind us—a new era of revolution has begun. The years of marking time have given place to a stirring call to arms. The first of May, 1919, will be an epoch-making day for the European proletariat. Russia, whose government a year and a half ago was looked upon

as a mad adventure, has become the leader of a new world movement. In Germany the compromise government of social-patriots, trying vainly to adjust itself to the growing discontent at home and to the rapacious demands of its imperialistic conquerors, is cracking under the strain. Hungary, in spite of the pious hope of a lying press, is defending its proletarian revolution against the attacks of the neighboring nationalities. In Munich the rule of the revolutionary proletariat persists, in the face of frenzied opposition within and without. In France the bourgeoisie awaits the coming of the First of May with trembling despair, Italy is quivering on the abyss of a nation wide uprising. A First of May, full of promise, full of portent.

Nor can we here, in America, play the role of the passive onlooker. We too must give our First of May a significance in keeping with the times in which we are privileged to live.

The National office has called upon us to observe May Day in gigantic demonstrations as a protest against the imprisonment of thousands of men and women who dared to speak the truth. Aye, we will protest. But not in empty meaningless phrases. Our protest must be a solemn consecration of ourselves and our movement to the greatness of the task that lies before us. The liberation of our comrades must not come as a gift from our capitalist masters, at the price of endless restrictions and degrading promises. It must be won for them by an undaunted, determined working class, by a Socialist movement that can proudly take its stand side by side and shoulder to shoulder with its comrades in Europe. Let us be worthy of this First of May.

Comrades, refuse to work on the First of May! For one day be your own masters. We have been forced so often to celebrate the holidays of others. This one day in the year belongs to us, is our day of freedom and of happiness!