

# May Day: Making and Unmaking Radical History in the U.S.

Jeong-Suk Joo

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## I. Introduction

This paper aims to examine why and how May Day—the International Workers' Day celebrated on May 1 each year—has been forgotten in the U.S., the country of its origin, and written out of its history. During my first semester as a graduate student in the U.S. I noticed that Americans observed Labor Day on the first Monday of September. I found this odd, since May Day was originated in the U.S. over a hundred years ago amid the labor struggle to achieve the eight-hour workday. It was then adopted as the International Workers' Day and spread around the world. Given this significance of May Day to labor, one of the first demands Korea's labor movement rightfully made in the late 1980s and gained was reclaiming May Day as their legitimate holiday against the state-imposed Laborers' Day (근로자의 날) on March 10.<sup>1)</sup> Yet, while Korean workers

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1) In Korea, May Day was first celebrated in 1923, but soon banned by the

wholeheartedly embraced May Day and fought hard to have the right to commemorate it, ironically May Day was nowhere to be heard of and seen in the very country that gave birth to it. In its place, Labor Day was observed as just a day off for relaxation and picnicking, devoid of any hint of class politics that characterized the May Day I knew of in Korea. Most Americans were not aware of what May Day was, let alone the fact that it was part of their tumultuous labor history. In other words, it was not just that May Day had not been observed in the U.S., but that its history had been obliterated. In addition, those few Americans who did know of May Day mostly thought the holiday as a foreign tradition hatched by the former Soviet Union. I am thus interested in uncovering why and how May Day came to be forgotten in the country of its birth.

In a sense, what is surprising about May Day is not that it was purged from the country of its origin, but that it was originated from the U.S. This is because the U.S. is known for the strong aversion of radicalism as indicated by the Red Scare and anti-communist hysteria following World War I and World War II respectively. In contrast, May Day has most often been associated with radical politics, especially communism, often leading to its ban in some capitalist countries across the world.<sup>2)</sup> In the light of America's anti-radical sentiments and May Day's radical association, May Day's demise in the U.S. at the height of anti-communism is almost anticlimactic. Yet, if May Day's decline in the U.S. is not surprising, this is not preordained. Rather, the fact that those who opposed May Day went so far as to deny its American roots and institute alternative events on May 1 to

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Japanese police. After liberation from Japan, it was revived in 1946, but ended again in 1957 due to its celebration by communists worldwide. From 1963, state-sponsored Laborers' Day on March 10 was celebrated until May Day was officially recognized as the workers' day in 1994 (최성화 1989).

2) Throughout this paper, the term "radical" means "favoring extreme changes in existing views, habits, conditions, or institutions," as defined by Merriam-Webster Online ([www.merriam-webster.com](http://www.merriam-webster.com)).

counteract it reflects the holiday's strength in the U.S. Given this, I aim to show why and how May Day was eventually brought down in the U.S. This is an important task, since May Day's history in the U.S. corresponds to that of taming and breaking down radical class politics and narrowing down the political horizon.

In documenting May Day's evolution and demise in the U.S., I faced the problem of the lack of even secondary materials on the subject, probably the fallout from May Day's erasure from the country. Most available writings on May Day were short informational articles dealing with its origins in the U.S. and its metamorphosis into the International Workers' Day, but not its later demise in the country, and their accounts of May Day's early history often varied (Chase; McInerney 1996; Goldway 2005; Wrigley 1990). Phillip S. Foner (1986) made the first serious attempt to chronicle May Day's history. Yet, as he focused on the celebration of the holiday in the U.S. and around the world, the details of its evolution in the U.S. that led to its demise—such as the challenges it faced and how it was viewed outside the circle of its supporters—were not fully explained. A recent book by Donna T. Haverty-Stacke (2008) was invaluable to my research, as it provided these details through the study of the primary sources in New York City and Chicago. In particular, it delineated the contestations over May Day's various meanings and several civic events that aimed to undermine it.

Following her insights, I aim to recount May Day's history in the U.S. by focusing on how some actors—trade unionists represented by the American Federation of Labor (AFL), radicals including anarchists, socialists and communists, and conservative civic organizations—struggled and interacted to fix and control May Day's symbolic meanings, to (un)make radical history, and to (re)shape popular memory. I examine these struggles within the broader context of the rivalries and splits that

occurred in the labor movement as well as in the history of the American left. Below, I first briefly look at May Day's origin in the U.S. and its evolution to the International Workers' Day in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was an important period of May Day's history, as its link to radicalism during this time was to greatly influence its fate in the U.S. Following this, I examine how diverse groups struggled in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to shape, restrict or dislodge May Day and to rewrite its history and memories according to their contemporary political concerns. Then, I look at May Day's rise and fall from the depression era to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Finally, it is my hope that examining the American experience with May Day can shed some light on the implication of the recent renaming of May Day in Korea from Workers' Day (노동절) to Laborers' Day (근로자의 날),<sup>3)</sup> the previous state-imposed name.

## II. The Origin of May Day

May Day was born in the U.S. amid the eight-hour workday movement during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. As the grip of industrialization deepened, labor grew restless and militant over the condition of "wage slavery." One of the major issues that labor was concerned with was the struggle to reduce work hours. Even though labor demand for shorter work hours was nothing new, in the post-Civil War era this centered on the movement for the eight-hour day (Roediger and Foner 1989). In particular, in the 1880s the national-level labor mobilization replaced prior small-scale local campaigns, and trade unionists as well as radicals such as anarchists and socialists came together in a concerted action to achieve the common goal.

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3) Laborers' Day is my translation of 근로자의 날 in Korean. It is thus different from Labor Day in the U.S.

First, between 1881 and 1883, representatives from local assemblies of the Knights of Labor, the largest labor organization with a membership of over 700,000 in 1886, submitted proposals to set aside a day in May or in September when “all branches of labor throughout the country shall make demand upon employers that thereafter eight hours shall constitute a legal day’s work.” Yet, the idea never materialized, as the leaders of the Knights of Labor—if not its rank and file members—disliked direct actions like strikes to enforce it, instead preferring the use of legislative pressure (Foner 1986: 14).

The newly-formed Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions (FOTLU), the predecessor of the AFL formed by union leaders, members of the Knights of Labor and socialists, also advocated a day of agitation for the eight-hour workday. Yet, it favored more direct measures to achieve this. At its 1884 national convention, a resolution was proposed which announced “that eight hours shall constitute a legal day’s labor from and after May 1, 1886,” and recommended labor organizations to “direct their laws so as to conform to this resolution by the time named.” Later, the FOTLU adopted this resolution and approved another proposal that specified “a vote [to] be taken in all labor organizations…as to the feasibility of a universal strike” for eight-hour workday. The choice of May 1 as the time of action was influenced by the building trade, for which the date marked the beginning of the contract year. It was also motivated by the wish to honor the Chicago workers’ achievement of the eight-hour law that took effect on May 1, 1867, although it was lost amid the economic depression of the next decade. In any case, May Day, traditionally a day to celebrate the coming of spring and rebirth, was now welded to the labor movement (Foner 1986: 16-17; Haverty-Stacke 2008: 26).

At its 1885 national convention, the FOTLU reaffirmed its 1884 resolution and the call for general strikes on May 1, 1886, in case

negotiations with employers were to falter. At the same time, the unions were to campaign for the eight-hour day until May 1, 1886. The FOTLU resolution brought disparate groups to the eight-hour movement. Even though the Knights of Labor rejected the FOTLU's repeated appeal for the support given its leaders' aversion for strike, many of its locals backed the FOTLU resolution and called upon their leaders to support it. Also joining the FOTLU were anarchists. In Chicago, the home of anarchism and the eight-hour movement, anarchists dominated the movement. At first, most anarchists regarded the eight-hour movement as too reformist, failing to strike "at the root of the evil" of capitalism. An article in the anarchist newspaper in Chicago argued in August 1885 that "whether a man works eight hours a day or ten hours a day, he is still a slave." Yet, anarchists eventually came to support the FOTLU resolution, seeing May 1 as an occasion to show workers' solidarity and to promote their anti-capitalist agendas (Chase; Foner 1986: 19-21; McNerney 1996; Haverly-Stacke 2008: 28-29).

The FOTLU's call for action unleashed a popular movement across America. By April 1886, a quarter million workers involved in the eight-hour movement, and on the day of action, over 350,000 joined the general strikes. Yet, the eight-hour movement was brought to a temporary halt due to the so-called Haymarket incident, which also helped to associate May Day with political radicalism. On May 3, several hundred striking workers in Chicago, after attending the eight-hour rally, joined lockout workers at the nearby McCormick Harvester plant to confront scabs at shift change. A fight broke out at the picket line, and the ensuing police interruption led to the killing of several strikers and the injury of many more. On the following day, a rally was held at the Haymarket Square to protest police violence. Close to the end of the peaceful rally, a bomb was thrown from the crowd into the police ranks, instantly killing one police officer and

injuring over 70. As the police fired into the remaining workers, several were killed and over 200 were wounded (Avrich 1984: 186, 190-93; Goldway 2005: 220-23; McInerney 1996; Green 2006: 162-73).

The incident was immediately followed by what some called as the first “Red Scare” (Chase). May 1 strikes and the Haymarket incident were frequently tied together in the press as an instance of radical extremism (Haverty-Stacke 2008: 34). Amid the fear of political radicalism and the resulting anti-radical sentiments, anarchists, radicals and unions all came under attacks. In particular, eight anarchists—Albert Parsons, August Spies, Samuel Fielden, Oscar Neebe, Michael Schwab, George Engel, Adolph Fischer and Louis Lingg—were all arrested and convicted of inciting the riot and murder through their speeches and ideas, not through their actions, even though it was never determined who threw the bomb, and no evidence was presented to uphold the charge.<sup>4</sup>) In order to be employed, workers had to agree not to join a union, and strikers were blacklisted. Amid this offensive, the Knights of Labor began to decline rapidly and disappeared by the mid-1890s (Henretta *et al.* 2000: 567-68). Not surprisingly, the eight-hour movement, now seen as closely associated with political radicalism following the bombing, suffered a huge damage. Immediately after the Haymarket incident, about a third of those who had won the eight-hour day lost it (McInerney 1996).

In this context, it became difficult to expect the kind of concerted action among diverse actors for the eight-hour movement as in 1886, since political repression following the Haymarket incident intensified their divergence. Identified as bomb-throwing terrorists, anarchists greatly

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4) Parsons, Spies, Engel and Fisher were executed on November 11, 1887, while Lingg committed a suicide the night before as an act of protest. Fielden, Neebe and Schwab were pardoned in 1893 and the other five were also posthumously pardoned, indicating the falsification of the charge (Foner 1975; Goldway 2005: 220-22).

suffered political repression. Yet, the sacrifice of the eight anarchists and political persecution also fueled the spirit of resistance among anarchists and radicals, and their further dedication to the fight against capitalism. For them, the eight-hour demonstrations on May 1, the “Haymarket Massacre” on May 4, the “martyrdom” of the eight anarchists and the political repression were inseparably linked, informing the way they would remember and celebrate May Day in the years to come. May Day was to become an arena to voice the wrongs and injustice of capitalism, and to advance their radical vision (Haverty-Stacke 2008: 36, 46).

On the other hand, while the AFL, formed in December 1888 as a successor to the FOTLU, resumed the eight-hour movement, it attempted to present the soundness of the movement and May Day by keeping distance from radical ideologies. In this regard, it proposed to hold the eight-hour rallies on well-known patriotic days. At its convention in December 1888, the AFL adopted the proposal to inaugurate a “period of agitation.” It was to take place first on Washington’s Birthday (February 22), the Fourth of July, and the first Monday in September 1889 that was celebrated as Labor Day by this time. It was to continue on Washington’s Birthday in 1890, and culminate on May 1 of the same year. In addition, the AFL abstained from general strikes that were equated with disorder and lawlessness, instead endorsing strikes by the one trade that was most ready and likely to achieve eight-hour workday. According to this, carpenters were scheduled to strike on May 1 in 1890. In this way, the AFL tried to win public acceptance of trade unionism as well as the eight-hour movement (Foner 1986: 40, 44; Haverty-Stacke 2008: 38-39).

Ironically, it was the AFL’s own action that further contributed to May Day’s radical uses and meanings by helping its global adoption. In July 1889, the Marxist International Socialist Congress, the founding event of the Second International, was held in Paris where over 400 delegates



gathered on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the French revolution. The AFL, under Samuel Gompers' leadership, decided to send a letter to Congress, urging "an international eight hour demonstration" on May 1, 1890. Its aim was not simply to broaden the support for the eight-hour movement. Its interest in part derived from the concern for the labor condition in the U.S., as it saw cheap labor from Europe was undermining the eight-hour workday and other gains in the country (Haverty-Stacke 2008: 40). It thus sought promote the eight-hour movement in Europe as a way to stem European immigrants to the U.S. In response to the AFL's call for action, the Congress passed a resolution on July 20, 1889, introduced by the French delegate, urging a "great international demonstration" for the eight-hour cause. May 1, 1890, was chosen, since "such a demonstration has already been resolved upon by the American Federation of Labor" (Foner 1986: 41-42; McInerney 1996).

The idea received enthusiastic responses. May Day demonstrations took place on May 1, 1890 in the U.S. as well as in most European countries where the eight-hour demand was set forth along with other issues. More significantly, while the 1889 resolution called for a one-time demonstration on May 1, 1890, it was soon established as an annual event. In 1891, the Socialist Labor Party (SLP) of the U.S. stated that "in two years May 1 has become the watchword for millions of toilers throughout the civilized world" (Foner 1986: 56). May Day's journey from a day of agitation for the eight-hour workday in the U.S. to the International Workers' Day further reinforced its radical association, as it became a day to assert "the class demands of the proletariat" and to commemorate the Haymarket "martyrs," and not just to fight for the eight-hour workday (Hobsbawm 1992: 285). It turned out to be an effective "means of propaganda and of drawing the working class of the world together against the exploiters" (Foner 1986: 64).

### Ⅲ. Contesting Meanings and Legacies of May Day

Between the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, May Day in the U.S. was identified with radical politics as a result of the Haymarket incident and the Second International's endorsement. Ultimately, this radical link discredited May Day and led to its demise in the country of its origin. Yet, this history was not an inexorable conservative victory. Instead, May Day was subject to intense competitions over its meanings and interpretations, as diverse actors advanced, appropriated or opposed it according to their agendas at the time. This involved reinterpreting the past by conservatives and the political left alike as well as forging new public events to undermine and supplant May Day. It shows that May Day and other alternative events were, more than anything, an arena where the struggles over meanings took place. It reveals how those involved defined their identities.

During this time, radicals in the U.S. such as anarchists, socialists, and later members of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) came to dominate May Day, claiming it their own and attributing it radical uses and meanings. They celebrated May Day with their own symbol and rituals such as the red flag, parades and mass meetings and whole-heartedly embraced the legacies of the Haymarket incident and the Second International. To these radicals, May Day was more than an occasion to promote the immediate gains for labor including the eight-hour workday. It was also a time to protest capitalism and to advance transnational working class solidarity and revolution. These radicals' view of May Day was well illustrated in their official publications. For example, Eugene V. Debs wrote in *The Worker*, the weekly of the Socialist Party of America (SP) in 1907 that "May Day is the first and only International Labor Day. It belongs to the working class and is dedicated to the revolution." The *Industrial Union*

*Bulletin*, official publication of the IWW, likewise argued that the “capitalist class can never be a friend of May Day; it will ever be its enemy” (Foner 1986: 77).

Interestingly, as leaders of these groups adhered to the orthodoxy of international working class revolution and prioritized class over nation, they often purposefully understated and ignored the American roots of May Day. For example, under the leadership of Daniel De Leon, the SLP in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century maintained “chemically pure” revolutionary programs (Henretta *et al.* 2000: 571). It thus saw May Day as the forum to promote transnational working class unity and international socialism. In doing so, it deliberately overlooked the role of the AFL and trade unionists in May Day’s origin and its global spread, and rewrote the holiday’s history by attributing its birth to the Second International (Haverty-Stacke 2008: 52-53). This stance undoubtedly reflected De Leon’s strong criticism of American trade unionism as well as the conflicts and splits between socialists and Gompers of the AFL around this time (Diggins 1992: 77, 87).<sup>5)</sup> Later in the late 1920s and the early 1930s, the Communist Party (CP) would repeat the SLP’s position of disregarding American roots of May Day, as it upheld the strict revolutionary orthodoxy (Haverty-Stacke 2008: 145).

However, workers who participated in May Day rallies and parades organized by radicals did not passively embrace their revolutionary programs. Instead, they joined May Day events often with their own agendas. For example, Jewish bakers parading on May Day in 1911 came out to demonstrate their unity in their ongoing strike, to show their commitment to their unions, and to present their demands for better wages

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5) After Gompers successfully defeated the attempt to build alliance between labor and Populism in mid-1890s, many disillusioned socialists within the AFL left it and followed De Leon’s call to join the SLP-led Socialist Trades and Labor Alliance (Davis 1999: 37).

and working conditions (Haverty-Stacke 2008: 86). In fact, the SP accommodated the immediate concerns of the working class, even while advancing its socialist principles during its May Day parades and rallies, and was able to attract more turnouts, including women, for its May Day events.<sup>6)</sup> The SP's flexibility reflected its revolt against the SLP's narrow doctrine in 1901 to form a broad-based political movement (Diggins 1992: 82-84). Unlike the SLP, the SP also emphasized May Day's relevance to Americans by pointing out its American roots. In particular, American flags were displayed and carried along with red flags during its May Day parades and rallies. It was a symbolic gesture indicating that May Day and the SP's agendas were perfectly compatible with—and could realize—what socialists believed the national flag truly embodied such as liberty, equality and democracy. In doing so, the SP added national elements to its transitional socialist politics, while also envisioning progressive national identity alternative to the mainstream ones (Haverty-Stacke 2008: 98, 100-03).

As these radicals rapidly made May Day their own tradition and defined it according to their political visions, conservative trade unionists and civic organizations remained hostile to it. Despite the attempt to highlight May Day's Americanness, they saw it as a foreign import hatched by radicals whose politics of class confrontation had no part in American tradition. As such, they made various efforts to drive out May Day from the contemporary scene and obliterate its history in the U.S. First of all, the AFL, advocating economic unionism of craft workers, accelerated its rightward shift between the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that signaled the incorporation of privileged craft unionists into the existing system. As part of its right turn, the AFL's stance on May Day also underwent a conservative change. Even while it continued to support May

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6) In 1910, it was able to mobilize 60,000 workers in New York City, including 10,000 female members of the Shirt Waist Makers' Union, to participate in its May Day parades (McInerney, 1996).

Day, it tried to deradicalize the holiday and limit its meanings by defining it as an occasion to promote the eight-hour workday (Haverty-Stacke 2008: 63). By 1901, the AFL refrained from mentioning May Day strikes, instead recommending only “discussion and commendation” of eight-hour workday (Foner 1986: 76).

Yet, May Day was more and more associated with and dominated by radicals both at home and abroad, and the AFL leaders found it increasingly difficult to police the holiday’s uses and meanings. As a result, the AFL began to further distance from the holiday. At its 1903 national convention, its conservative leaders soundly defeated a proposal to recognize May Day as a day of protest against capitalism. In addition, much like the SLP and later the CP, from 1905 the AFL ceased to mention in official publications May Day’s American origin, claiming that the holiday belonged to European radicals (Foner 1986: 76-77; Haverty-Stacke 2008: 44). Likewise, while Gompers once rightfully credited “the agitation of the AFL” for permanently establishing May Day for the working class (Foner 1986: 56), the AFL leaders no longer acknowledged its role. In the end, they came to abandon May Day completely and forbade its member unions’ participation in its events, although some local unions under the socialist leadership still did. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the AFL began to celebrate Labor Day in the place of May Day.

The origin of Labor Day dates back to 1882 when it was proposed to the Central Labor Union (CLU) of New York, a lodge of the Knights of Labor, to hold a celebration to honor the working class and to demonstrate its organized power. In accordance with this, the CLU organized a parade in New York City in early September. In 1884, it held the parade again on the first Monday of September and passed a resolution to hold all future parades on the same day, which it designated as Labor Day. At first, Labor Day, like May Day, was more like a day of dissent by radical unions

(Watts). Yet, by the late 1880s, it became more a day of celebration, picnics and leisure than a day of protest. It was recognized as a holiday in five states in the late 1880s, and became a national holiday in 1894. Enacted into law only 6 days after the forceful breakup of the Pullman Strike,<sup>7)</sup> Labor Day apparently intended to appease labor in the midst of economic depression and the working class upheaval in the 1890s. As a national holiday for workers, Labor Day was preferred to May Day due to the latter's link to the Haymarket incident (Koerner 2010; U.S. Department of Labor 2010a; PBS 2001). Given this political consideration, the *Industrial Union Bulletin* of the IWW convincingly argued in 1907 that "Labor Day has completely lost its class character. The very fact that Labor Day was legally, formally and officially established by the capitalist class itself, through its organized government, took the starch out of it: destroyed its class character." The IWW also criticized the AFL for abandoning May Day it had initiated, while pledging to continue the holiday (Foner 1986: 77).

It was precisely this lack of class character that attracted the AFL leaders to Labor Day. At the same time, the AFL's action helped to reinforce Labor Day's classless feature. While workers had typically put on work clothes for parades, the AFL members parading on Labor Day were dressed more like citizens than like the working class, wearing suits completed with hats and canes and thus effacing their working class identity. The AFL leaders considered that this deradicalized and

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7) The Pullman Strike occurred in May 1894 when workers of the Pullman Palace Car Company struck in response to the wage cut. The company cut wages, but not the rents for company housing, citing the drop in the company's revenue due to the economic depression of 1893 (the so-called "Panic of 1893"). The strike became more than a usual labor dispute, as the American Railway Union, led by Eugene V. Debs, launched a boycott by refusing to handle trains with Pullman cars. In July, President Grover Cleveland sent federal troops to break up the strike on the ground that the strike interfered with the delivery of U.S. mail (Henretta et al. 2000: 569).

respectable image of their members was necessary to make trade unionism acceptable to mainstream America. The AFL also gravitated to Labor Day, as the state sanction made it more American than the socialist- and anarchist-dominated May Day. By observing Labor Day, the AFL wished to tap into Labor Day's symbolic associations in order to present its members as being honorable and patriotic. American flags carried during Labor Day parades were an indication of another attempt to link trade unionism with patriotism. One interesting corollary of the AFL's repudiation of May Day was to rewrite its history with Labor Day. For example, the AFL argued that it observed Labor Day only from its beginning in 1884<sup>8)</sup> (Haverty-Stacke 2008: 67-69; 128).

According to Foner, the nation's mainstream press also noted this classless nature of Labor Day, commenting that "while European labor had a class holiday on May 1, the nation as whole paid its respect to the role of labor" on Labor Day (1986: 76). It echoed and reinforced the attempt to counterpose Labor Day and its supposed Americanness to May Day and its foreignness. For example, an editorial of the *Boston Globe* argued that the Labor Day parade was "a demonstration of the honest American workingman." Its participants were "sober, clean, quiet, well-clothed and well-appearing men" and "secure and conservative in their association." On the other hand, May Day marches were described as an occasion where

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8) This claim is mistaken, since the AFL initially observed May Day as well. It is problematic in another way. This claim is probably based on the role of Peter J. McGuire in the initiation of Labor Day. McGuire, the founder of the Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners and one of the leading figures of the early AFL, has been credited with first proposing the celebration of Labor Day. Yet, this has been contested by the contending claim that Matthew Maguire, the secretary of the Central Labor Union of New York, was the real creator of Labor Day. According to Ted Watts, Maguire's role has been overlooked due to his fairly radical political beliefs as well as Gompers' wish not to have Labor Day associated with radical politics of Maguire. In an 1897 interview, Gompers thus credited his AFL fellow for creating Labor Day (U.S. Department of Labor 2010b; Watts; Grossman 1973).

“wild-eyed agitators” spoke (Goldway 2005: 223-24). Those attending May Day activities, representing the “European type,” were said to be “radicals, mostly socialists and anarchists.” The *New York Times* repeated this contrast, as it observed that “some few among the several thousand [present at May Day events], unlike a meeting on Labor Day, seemed to be American-born, but accents and foreign mannerisms predominated” (Foner 1986: 76).

If the AFL leaders succeeded in countering May Day with Labor Day, they were not so successful in commanding its members’ use of Labor Day. Much as unions participating in May Day rallies and parades sponsored by socialists or other radicals had their own agendas, workers’ view of Labor Day was divergent from that of AFL leaders. As Labor Day was officially recognized as a national holiday, it was seen as time not to fight for, but to relish gains. In addition, since Labor Day was part of a three-day weekend at the end of the summer vacation season, it was the last chance to enjoy summer days. Accordingly, workers increasingly passed over Labor Day events to spend the day as they saw it fit. In order to address the dwindling turnout of its members for Labor Day events, the AFL leaders designated the Sunday before Labor Day as Labor Sunday in 1909 and also urged churches to devote part of their services on Labor Sunday to labor-related issues. Yet, they failed to change the tenor of Labor Day. According to the *New York Times*, by the mid-1930s, most Americans thought of leisure, not labor, on Labor Day (U.S. Department of Labor 2010a; Haverty-Stacke 2008: 77-81).

Besides Labor Day, from the late 1910s May Day organizers were faced with a reactionary political milieu and the surge of anti-radicalism that culminated in the Red Scare in 1919 and the Palmer Raids in early 1920. A series of events contributed to this change. American participation in World War I in 1917 promoted patriotism, national unity, and little



tolerance of political dissension. In addition, the Russian Revolution in November 1917 and the founding of the Third International (commonly known as the Communist International or Comintern) in 1919 with an aim to overthrow “the international bourgeoisie” and to create “an international Soviet republic” fueled American fear of radicalism. This was further exacerbated by the rise in strikes in 1919—a newspaper headline informed that “Reds directing Seattle strike [in 1919] to test chance for revolution”—and the discovery of the plot to mail bombs to prominent government officials that were suspected to blow up on May Day 1919 (Henretta *et al.* 2000: 732).

In this context, the oppositions to May Day, seen as a radical foreign import, intensified. New York City banned May Day parades from 1919 to 1921 on the ground of a possible recurrence of the bombing plot. In particular, during this time, public events became an arena of competition and struggle, as new events were invented that aimed to counter May Day and dislodge it from its historic date. In 1920, the American Defense Society started American Day on May 1 that featured patriotic-themed parades and mass meetings. It was frank about aiming at May Day, since, through the American Day events, “May 1<sup>st</sup> could thus be most advantageously utilized as the occasion...to show how we can preserve our Americanism against the sinister infiltration of anarchy and lawlessness.” Also contending for May 1 were Loyalty Day parades that the Rotary Club organized in New York City from 1920 to 1925 and in Chicago from 1921 to 1924. Disturbed by the growing presence of children in May Day parades, the Rotary Club organized Loyalty Day to pull them away from the radical event as well as to infuse them with a patriotic vision (Haverty-Stacke 2008: 115-18).

Another event directed at children on May 1 during the 1920s was Child Health Day organized by a coalition of politicians, school officials, and

social workers. Again, it was held on May 1, and this choice was influenced by the date's long association with springtime rebirth. Yet, the AFL's wholehearted support for designating May 1 as Child Health Day was motivated by the anticipated effect of neutralizing and displacing May Day (Foner 1986: 133). During this time, the AFL leaders reiterated the claim that May Day had originated from European radicals, thus irrelevant to American labor. Their insistence on the display of the American flag as part of Child Health Day events further revealed the AFL leaders' instrumentalist approach to Child Health Day as the counterbalance to May Day and its supposed foreign roots. Accordingly, the AFL Executive Council welcomed the official authorization in 1928 to observe Child Health Day on May 1, stating that "Hereafter, May 1 will be known as Child Health Day...[It] will no longer be known as either strike day or Communist Labor Day" (Haverty-Stacke 2008: 123, 126, 128-29).

#### IV. May Day's Resurgence and the Beginning of the End

Amid the conservative milieu and the attempts to undermine and displace May Day during the 1920s, the union turnout for May Day dwindled throughout the decade. Given this, the *New York Times*, echoing the AFL leaders, could deny May Day's relevance to American workers. In an article titled "May Day Finds Labor Well Off in America" on May 2, 1926, it proclaimed that "the traditional mark of May Day in Europe faded in the US" (Foner 1986: 108). Yet, the Great Depression completely shattered this smug prediction as well the economy of the 1920s. It brought a more critical look at capitalism, while the New Deal reforms provided a favorable setting to address labor concerns and to organize

unions. In this context, May Day resurged high, reaching its height in terms of the number of participants and its resonance with wider American society, as its organizers found people far more receptive to radical ideas and came to broaden their basis beyond the usual socialist or communist circle (Goldway 2005: 224).

During the 1930s, the Communist Party (CP), organized in 1919 from the left-wing of the SP, emerged as the primary actor in the left politics as well as May Day events. In particular, following the Comintern decision in 1934 to form the Popular Front in response to the growing threat of fascism, the CP retreated from its previous strict adherence to the orthodox revolutionary position and attempted from 1936 to build a broad-based coalition of anti-fascist groups. As part of the Popular Front strategy, it took a patriotic and populist turn, lending support for the New Deal programs (Diggins 1992: 165-74). In this regard, it also asserted May Day's American roots, no longer attributing its origin to European socialists. In addition, much like the SP and the AFL before, it employed the American flag—displaying it along with the red flag during May Day parades—as an indication of its embrace of the nation (Haverty-Stacke 2008: 143, 163-67). No doubt the meanings of the nation it sought from the national flag were different from those the AFL did. Yet, its nod to the American flag and the American roots of May Day were equally driven by political expediency.

Yet, May Day's heyday proved to be brief, as this was followed by its demise in the next decade. May Day's demise after its heyday is simply ironic considering that the tribulations of the earlier period failed to eradicate it completely in the U.S. A couple of factors contributed to May Day's waning after the 1930s. First was the CP's politically expedient policies and May Day's link to the CP. As the Soviet Union signed a nonaggression pact with Nazi Germany in August 1939, the CP abandoned

the Popular Front policy. When World War II broke out, it opposed American involvement in the war. This reversal of the policy seriously compromised the CP's credibility to those opposing fascism. It also deepened its split from other radicals—especially the Old Guard faction of the SP—who long suspected the CP for being under the command of the Soviet Union (Haverty-Stacke 2008: 170-72). In this context, the CP's domination of May Day made the holiday seem indeed foreign and un-American and came to alienate even the radicals who long sustained it. For example, the socialists, given their growing distrust of the CP, held separate May Day events from 1938—although these events were eclipsed by those organized by the CP (Foner 1986: 122).

As Germany reneged on the nonaggression pact and invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, the CP reversed its position again, resuming the Popular Front policy and supporting America's war efforts. Yet, this did not help to restore its reputation, but only further indicated its subordination to the Soviet Union. As part of its support for the nation at war, the CP voluntarily discontinued May Day parades from 1942 to 1946 and even dissolved itself as a party in 1944, instead being organized as the Communist Political Association (Haverty-Stacke 2008: 175). This decision also reflected the huge upsurge of nationalism—and the CP's attempt to take advantage of this sentiment—which was another critical development during World War II. In particular, being at war with fascism, Americans viewed their country as a beacon of democracy and freedom and fully endorsed these and other American values. Working class America likewise rallied behind the nation by supporting war efforts and by turning out for such patriotic events as Flag Day and "I Am an American Day" that was an occasion for newly naturalized citizens to pledge their loyalty to the U.S. (Haverty-Stacke 2008: 177-83). All these developments did not bode well for May Day, as they meant an ever shrinking ground for political

dissension as well as traditional May Day concerns such as working class issues and critique of capitalism.

However, while the CP policies and the wartime surge of patriotism facilitated May Day's decline even before the advent of the Cold War, it really took the viciousness of Cold War anti-communism to finally bring it down there. With the onset of the Cold War, anti-communism emerged an all-consuming passion for Americans. A slightest hint of communist connections opened the salvo of red-baiting, culminating in the rise of McCarthyism, and this severely restricted the boundary of acceptable political expressions. The federal loyalty program—investigating federal employees and requiring them to take a loyalty oath—the Truman administration instituted to ward off the charge that it was soft on communism only reinforced anti-communist hysteria, as it was widely replicated by other public and private organizations. Anti-communism context also greatly affected the labor movement, as it was feared that the Soviet-controlled communists were taking it over. Thus, under the Taft-Hartley Act enacted in 1947, labor leaders were required to take oath that they were not members of the CP (Henretta *et al.* 2000: 884). At the same time, unions conducted their own anti-communist crusade, purging communists within their ranks, in part to deflect the accusation that they were communists-influenced. For example, the Congress of Industrial Organizations, representing industrial unionism, expelled eleven member unions that refused to drive out leaders suspected of being a communist or communist sympathizer (Davis 1999: 79-81).

In this Cold War context, sustaining May Day, revived after the end of World War II, became more challenging than ever before. May Day's association with the CP and thus the Soviet Union when the latter was America's archenemy made the holiday vulnerable to anti-communist attacks and seriously undermined its effectiveness as an arena to address

working class issues. Rather than helping the cause of labor and the left politics, the link to May Day became a political liability, inviting political repression. In addition, even though May Day supporters repeatedly pointed out the holiday's American origin, most Americans saw it a foreign import which was now attributed to the Soviet Union, no longer to European radicals. Accordingly, those who tried to organize May Day events were seen as unpatriotic and met with various legal restrictions as well as competing public events aimed to displace the holiday.

The case in point were May Day organizers in New York City. In 1953, Catholic War Veterans petitioned the city council to forbid May Day organizers from parading through Eighth Avenue, requiring them to march elsewhere "far removed from the heart and center of the city." Ostensibly, the parade permit that had already been granted was cancelled for fear of a "potential riot-laden situation" created by "the anti-Communist feelings of other citizens," which were in turn stirred up by May Day parades. Yet, the real reason was because the attorney general listed the New York United May Day Committee as one of subversive organizations, and the Federal Subversive Activities Control Board ruled that the sponsors of May Day were "puppets of a foreign power." Accordingly, the New York City Police Commissioner reasoned that, as "American boys are dying in Korea in mortal conflict with the puppets of the same foreign power," "it would be an insult to the people of this city...to permit these same puppets to march in our streets with the sanction of the municipal government." Thus, only May Day annual meetings were held at Union Square in 1953 (Foner 1986: 137-38; Haverty-Stacke 2008: 201-03).

Yet, even holding annual meetings soon proved to be difficult. In 1954, May Day organizers had to hold its annual meeting at Union Square only from 6:30 to 8:00 PM, as the Fourteenth Street Association, the organization of local businesses, obtained the prior permit to use the

Square on May 1 to hold patriotic rallies for eight hours. Again in 1955, as the Fourteenth Street Association organized the patriotic events at the Square on May 1 as well as April 30, the May Day meeting was pushed to April 29. In this way, the Fourteenth Street Association could claim in 1959 that the effort “to rid the park of the Communist taint of former years” and to “rededicate” it to “Americanism” was a success. Around this time, the Veterans of Foreign Wars organized Loyalty Day events on May 1, which, unlike the event of the same name in the 1920s, was directed at adults as a day of reaffirming their loyalty to the nation. In 1958, it was declared as a national holiday.<sup>9)</sup> As the Veterans of Foreign Wars pointed out, the Fourteenth Street Association events were “a companion move” to Loyalty Day. As Loyalty Day tried to displace May Day from its historic date, the Fourteenth Street Association events aimed to crowd it out from its historic gathering place (Foner 1986: 139-41).

As a result of the unrelenting conservative attacks and the prevalent perception of May Day’s communist link at the height of anti-communist hysteria, even the most ardent defenders of May Day and the most left-leaning unions began to desert the holiday. For example, the Cake Bakers Union of Manhattan forbade the participation of its members in May Day parades and expelled those who did follow through (Haverty-Stacke 2008: 213). Further indicating May Day’s fall, the American Legion in Moswee, Wisconsin, cynically appropriated the holiday in 1950 as an occasion to stir up anti-communist hysteria by sponsoring a mock takeover of the city by communists during May Day parades (Foner 1986: 136). By the early 1960s, only a few hundred people turned out to hold far shrunken May Day meetings and gradually May Day was relegated into oblivion in the country of its origin.

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9) In that year, May 1 was declared as Law Day as well.

## V. Conclusion

May Day that had begun as the eight-hour workday movement in the U.S. in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century was transformed into the international working class holiday by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. As an instance of globalization from below, this, along with the Haymarket incident, helped to radicalize May Day in the U.S. It soon became an event dominated by political radicals who saw in it an occasion to promote immediate working class concerns as well as their revolutionary programs. Precisely because of this radical association, May Day faced strong opposition from diverse sources for most of its history. Not only were May Day's American origin and its relevance to the country denied, but new events were also constantly invented to challenge and displace May Day. As Will Parry summed up, from the onset of May Day those who opposed the holiday attempted to "falsify its significance and to make its observance impossible" by presenting it as a creation of European radicals or the Soviet Union and by portraying it "something alien to the struggles of the very working class that gave it birth." In the place of May Day, workers were offered "Loyalty Day and Law Day by people who invented loyalty oaths" and who "cynically flaunt the nation's labor laws" (Foner 1986: 159). Finally, amid the mounting pressure from the Cold War anti-communism, even long-term supporters turned their back on May Day and abandoned it. As a result, while May Day has been fought for and celebrated worldwide as the true workers' day, the holiday and its history has been obliterated in the country of its origin.

May Day's demise in the U.S. has grave implications. Given that May Day was closely linked to the politics of the left and the working class, its downfall was symptomatic of the latter's marginalization and decline in postwar America. For example, the democratization at the workplace was



one of the major concerns during the strikes between 1933 and 1937. Yet, in the postwar era, the management control over the workplace and production was accepted inviolable and the working class interest was instead defined in terms of its share of the country's economic prosperity (Davis 1999: 52). In addition, the CP and other radical groups were subject to official surveillance and harassment, even though they posed no significant challenge to the postwar political order (Davis 1992). In short, May Day's history and its eventual decline are testimony to the taming of the political, if not economic, militancy of the working class and the ever narrowing boundaries of permissible political expressions in the U.S. At the same time, as Haverty-Stacke correctly points out, its obliteration means the further diminution of a meaningful forum to voice the critique of capitalism and to advance radical class politics (2008: 220). In light of these developments in the U.S., the recent government-imposed change of May Day's name in Korea requires close attention, since it certainly smacks of the attempt to tame May Day's significance and meanings—although its official recognition has already done so—by reining in the more radical connotation of the term “workers.”

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Abstract

## May Day: Making and Unmaking Radical History in the U.S.

Jeong-Suk Joo

This paper examines why and how May Day, which is celebrated worldwide as the International Workers' Day on May 1 each year, has been forgotten in the U.S., the country of its origin, and written out of its history and what it implies. It examines the history of May Day in the U.S. as one of the prime instances of taming and breaking down radical class politics and narrowing down the political horizon in the country. It first briefly looks at May Day's origin in the U.S. and its subsequent transformation into the International Workers' Day in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. It also examines how the holiday came to be associated with political radicalism during this period. Following this, the paper recounts May Day's evolution in the U.S. in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by focusing on how diverse groups including trade unionists and political radicals struggled and interacted to fix and control May Day's symbolic meanings, to (un)make radical history, and to (re)shape popular memory. It then looks at how May Day's heyday in the 1930s was ironically followed by its demise in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, as the holiday faced the heightened oppositions amid the viciousness of Cold War anti-communism.

**Key Words:** May Day, Haymarket incident, Labor Day, American Federation of Labor (AFL), Eight-Hour Workday Movement  
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소속: 한국외국어대학교

주소: (139-220) 서울시 노원구 중계본동 한화꿈에그린아파트 107동 902호

이메일: joojs2001@yahoo.com

