Università di Firenze Dipartimento di Formazione, Lingue, Intercultura, Letterature e Psicologia

Corso in Lingua e Cultura degli U.S.A. John Gilbert

## THE ORIGINS OF MAY DAY (ANSWERS)

**Instructions:** Put the following paragraphs in the appropriate order to reconstruct the text. The first two paragraphs have already been done.

\_1\_ A. In 1886 a new labor organization was forming in the U.S.A., the American Federation of Labor. At its convention in 1884, the A.F.L. resolved that all labor should come together on May 1, 1886 to demand the establishment of the eight-hour workday, adopting a historic resolution which asserted that "eight hours shall constitute a legal day's labour from and after May 1, 1886" and workers should refuse to work more than that.

\_2\_ B. A popular song of the workers of the day reflects their sentiments:

"We mean to make things over

We're tired of toil for nought

But bare enough to live on; never

An hour for thought.

We want to feel the sunshine: we

Want to smell the flowers

We're sure that God has willed it

And we mean to have eight hours.

We're summoning our forces from

Shipyards, shop and mill

Eight hours for work, eight hours for rest

Eight hours for what we will!"

\_6\_ C. There followed across the nation an anti-left, anti-union witch-hunt pushed ahead by a hysterical press campaign and a virtual reign of police terror. The foreign born and union leaders were randomly arrested and brutalized in cities across the country, homes were invaded and doors broken in, and the presses of foreign newspapers were smashed. On May 5 in Milwaukee police fired on demonstrating Polish workers killing 9. Any strike or struggle for shorter hours or better wages and working conditions was met with arrests, conspiracy charges and long-term imprisonment for labor leaders and activists.

\_11\_ D. Thus was born the International Workers Holiday on May 1st – May Day.

\_5\_ E. On May 4 the demonstration was peaceful and began disbanding because of the rainy weather, when the police marched on the few hundred demonstrators remaining in the crowd and demanded that the peaceful assembly disperse. A bomb was thrown and one policeman was killed, 66 policemen were wounded, and six later died. The police immediately opened fire hysterically on the crowd, killing several and wounding some 200. Many of the policemen were wounded in their own crossfire. It was never determined who threw the bomb, although evidence later came to light that the bomb may have been thrown by a police agent, as part of a conspiracy involving certain steel industry bosses to discredit the labor movement.

\_8\_ F. The “Haymarket Martyrs” were avowed anarchists who were tried for their political beliefs and associations, as well as their speech, all freedoms supposedly guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution. Some 600,000 working people attended their funeral in Chicago.

\_9\_ G. In 1888 the A.F.L. set May 1, 1889 as a further day of action for the eight-hour day. In 1889 in Paris the founding congress of the 2nd International Association of Working People voted to set May 1, 1890 as an international day of action for the eight-hour day in memory of the “Haymarket Martyrs”. On May 1, 1890 workers all over Europe and the Americas demonstrated by holding meetings and parades to support the eight-hour workday, with some half a million demonstrating in London alone. Due to the success of the 1890 May Day demonstrations, May 1, 1891 was also set as an international day for workers’ demonstrations for the eight-hour day. In Rome there were clashes with the police causing several deaths and various injured, with hundreds arrested.

\_7\_ H. In Chicago eight anarchist leaders, Albert Parsons, August Spies, Samuel Fielden, Michael Schwab, George Engel, Adolph Fischer, Louis Lingg, and Oscar Neebe, were arrested and tried for the incident. Only three had actually been present at the demonstration, and they had been on the organizers’ wagon in full view of the police and the crowd at the time the bomb was thrown. Their trial was a farce. No proof was offered by the state that any of the eight men had thrown the bomb, were connected with its throwing, or even approved of such acts. Seven of the men received death sentences while one man got 15 years. Because of a massive international campaign to free the unjustly accused men, the day before the execution the Governor commuted the sentences of two of the condemned. The night before, one man committed suicide. On November 11, 1887 the remaining four men were hanged. From beneath his hood, August Spies spoke*: "The time will come when our silence will be more powerful than the voices you strangle today."*

\_4\_ I. Nationally and in Chicago the strikes for the eight-hour day were spreading, and on May 3 the Chicago police clubbed the locked out workers at the Mc Cormick Harvester Company as they escorted scabs into the plant. At the end of the workday a large crowd of these workers were assembled outside the plant waiting for the scabs to come out. The police charged them with their guns drawn. The workers began to flee and the police opened fire shooting them in the back as they ran and killing six. Outraged by this act of brutality, anarchist leaders organized a protest against police violence to be held the next day, May 4, at Haymarket Square.

\_10\_ J. In August 1891 the 2nd Congress of the 2nd International meeting in Brussels declared May 1st a permanent international working class holiday for workers in every country in commemoration of the “Haymarket Martyrs”, a day on which workers should demonstrate their shared labor demands and their solidarity.

\_3\_ K. Chicago was the main center of the U.S. labor movement and unionists, anarchists and other leftists worked to build for the May 1st initiative. By May 1, 1886 there were strikes in over 10,000 factories across the U.S.A. involving hundreds of thousands of workers. On May 1st there were labor demonstrations across the U.S.A. with the largest being in Chicago where a crowd of some 80,000 people marched for the eight-hour day. The parade took place without any trouble and the day came to a close.