

May Day in San Francisco

David Solnit

1999

“Alone we cannot change the terms of this rotten deal, but together anything is possible. Undo the leash of time and money. Take back your lives. We have the right, and we have the ability to make life worth living, to make our lives what we want them to be, not what the absurd logic of private property and wage labor says they must be.”

—Narration from 1999 May Day Pageant

The “Landlord, Boss, Government” sign burst into flames, held aloft by face-masked workers during the May Day Pageant—the culmination of this year’s celebration of May Day in San Francisco.

On the windy slopes of Dolores Park, over 6,000 people came together to celebrate May Day—International Workers Day—with a Maypole dance, street theater, spoken word and music performances, a 200-foot long graffiti mural, and a free picnic. The event ended with a street theater pageant that became a 2,000 person, festive procession of music, giant puppets, singing, banners, and black/red and black flags. For the second year, a unique alliance of arts, community and workers groups brought May Day back to the Bay Area, connecting it to contemporary struggles.

Reclaim May Day ’99 is an experiment in using street theater and celebration to express a broad culture and community of resistance, and to popularize anarchist and radical history and ideas, without speeches or leaflets. The San Francisco Art and Revolution Street Theater Collective initiated the project as part of our ongoing effort to help inspire and catalyze movements and communities capable of making radical change and social revolution.

The celebration recognizes the dual character of May Day, the green, honoring Spring and the earth, and the red, remembering our history of struggle and resistance.

The Green

Bright cloth ribbons streaming down from a 20-foot Maypole began the day, as hundreds of celebrants wove them “in and out, up and down, in the patterns of love and life.” This green side of May Day—a festival of Spring, of fertility, of the Earth, of sexuality, of game playing—was celebrated in much of the world, but was repressed by authorities in Europe and protestant New England long before our government executed the Haymarket Martyrs.

The Red

On May 1, 1886, hundreds of thousands of working people stood up to their bosses and went on strike for the eight hour day as a step towards a world where all of us could manage our own time, work and lives, free of bosses and government.

Eight Chicago anarchist labor organizers were arrested during the strike, four of whom were hanged (plus one who took his own life) following a bomb thrown at police and a frame-up trial. The strike and its aftermath were pivotal events in the history of workers’ and anarchist movements around the globe.

May 1 became International Workers Day to honor the strike and the executed Haymarket Martyrs. May Day is widely celebrated throughout the world except where the tradition began, but labor and community groups in the United States and Canada are now bringing it back.

Cultures of Resistance

Reclaim May Day was full of diverse Bay Area cultures of resistance. As the Maypole festivities wove on, Xtlalli, a 20-person Aztec dance group, moved in a giant circle to drumming and song. At the same time, local graffiti writers were painting mural pieces and a spoken word stage mixed up beatnik era poets with teenage spoken word. The food committee, which included the San Francisco and East Bay Food Not Bombs groups, served a free picnic to several thousand people.

The San Francisco Mime Troupe set up their giant stage for the day, and performed a new play about gentrification. Twenty five teenagers from Oakland, Destiny Youth Arts, blew everyone away with their high energy rap, hip hop dance, and theater mix. Labor choruses sang May Day songs in English and Spanish.

Grassroots groups, including homeless activists, tenants, sex workers, and sweatshop activists, performed street theater about their struggles to survive. As promised, there were no speeches.

May Day Pageant

The afternoon finished with an elaborate street play about the history of May Day, private property and wage labor. Thirty of over fifty pageant participants, ranging in age from seven to over seventy, joined Art and Revolution just an hour before the pageant. An incredible singing group accompanied the procession with topical songs, while a dance group dramatized the story through movement.

Giant puppets of the Haymarket Martyrs, a Landlord/Boss/Government puppet, and masked and costumed cops and workers acted out past and present conflicts aimed at reclaiming our time and our lives. Giant liberation puppets representing labor, our homes and the earth ran down the hill from the outskirts of the park and began the street parade, which wound through the neighborhood, stopping at a Gap store long enough to pie a puppet effigy of its president, Donald Fischer, and then into the surrounding Mission district to decry gentrification.

Reclaim the Future

The spirit and momentum of May Day will continue. to attack economic globalization as we Reclaim the Streets of San Francisco's financial district as part of the June 18 International Day of Action Against Corporate Globalization.

Also, we call on theater groups, artists, activists, and musicians to join us and tens of thousands of others this November 29 to December 3 to Till the streets of Seattle with large scale street theater and mass nonviolent direct action at the World Trade Organization (WTO) meeting in Seattle.

Envision a procession of thousands of people parading through Seattle with giant puppets illustrating the economic and ecological devastation left by corporate globalization and showing glimpses of the world as it could be—global liberation. Toxic chemical die-ins, dramatized uprisings, and huge props taking over major Seattle streets. Vibrant sounds and images of community, life, creativity and resistance in the face of hundreds of deadening WTO bureaucrats, businessmen and politicians.

Contact Art and Revolution

Contact the Art and Revolution Collective on the Web at: www.igc.org/justice/artandrevolution; or phone 415-339-7801. (If out of area, tell us if we can call collect.)

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