

“Workers of the World, Unite!”: International Rhetoric and National Action on May 1, 1890¹

On May 10, 1890, *Commonweal*, a socialist journal published in London, declared in its first line that, “There is only one event this week to be noted; beside its overpowering importance all others shrink into insignificance.”² The authors, unnamed, were referring to the first celebration of the labor holiday May Day, which took place in London and cities across the world for the first time in May 1890.³ Londoners, and working-class citizens across the globe, celebrated May Day as a working-class holiday for the first time in 1890. It did not become a bank holiday in England until 1978.⁴ The evolution of working class power was an influential dynamic in the fin-de-siècle European metropolis. May Day represented the manifestation of global working-class discontent and a sense of working-class unity in the struggle. International May Day celebrations also reflected rhetoric that emphasized the importance of unified, multinational action, which manifested in city-wide demonstrations, like in London on both May 1 and May 4. The May 10, 1890 edition of *Commonweal* devoted significant space to describing what May Day demonstrations looked like in the city in London. The document provides critical insight into working class political action in London in this period. *Commonweal*’s coverage of

¹ “The Labour Struggle: The May Day Demonstration,” *Commonweal* (London, UK), May 10, 1890.

<https://www.marxists.org/history/international/social-democracy/commonweal.htm>.

² “Labour Day,” *Commonweal* (London, UK), May 10, 1890.

<https://www.marxists.org/history/international/social-democracy/commonweal.htm>.

³ There were two labor May Day celebrations in London in 1890: May 4, and May 1. The split into two days represented a divide in London socialist organizations. The Socialist League, run by William Morris, was inflexible in their demand for recognition of the international May Day of Thursday, May 1. However, competing interests, notably the London Trade Council, only agreed to recognize a Sunday, May 4 demonstration (which did not require a work stoppage). *Commonweal* acknowledges that the May 1 demonstration was less attended than the May 4 demonstration, and claims that despite fewer people, the significance of May 1 demonstration is stronger. (William Morris 564) ; “Labour Day,” *Commonweal*.

⁴ John Chu, “The history of May Day,” National Trust, <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/discover/history/the-history-of-may-day#>.

May 1, 1890 showed that May Day was an opportunity for working-class reclamation of the city in pursuit of socialist political goals; it also reflected that even while this political action manifested in the domestic sphere, it was inspired by and infused with a spirit of international working-class solidarity.

The first issue of *Commonweal* was published in February 1885 and was the official journal of the Socialist League.⁵ The Socialist League was a London-based political group founded by William Morris. William Morris edited, financed, and heavily contributed to the project. Morris' art was deeply connected to his politics, and he was a pioneer of the Arts-and-Crafts Movement, a movement that connected artistic expression with political thought. Morris was a member of the Social Democratic Federation, another prominent London socialist organization but left over disagreements with the group's leader, H.M. Hyndman. One aspect of the two men's intellectual disagreements was Hyndman's "extreme difficulty in understanding Morris's attempt to blend Marxism with forms of artistic social libertarian thought."⁶ This conflict led Morris to founding the Socialist League in 1884.⁷ Between February 1885 and May 1886 *Commonweal* was a monthly publication, but began a weekly release schedule in May of 1886.⁸ *Commonweal* emerged at a time of immense change for the working classes of London, as well as globally. The active nature of the Social Democratic Federation as well as the Socialist League represents a broader trend of class conflict and anti-capitalist political energy. In the fin-de-siècle, across Europe, the number of industrial workers was growing rapidly alongside

⁵ E.P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1955), 391.

⁶ David Stewart Nash, "William Morris" in *The Continuum Encyclopedia of British Philosophy*, ed. A.C. Grayling, Naomi Goulder, Andrew Pyle (London: Continuum, 2010), <https://www-oxfordreference-com.proxy048.nclive.org/display/10.1093/acref/9780199754694.01.0001/acref-9780199754694-e-1500?rskey=5iNK74&result=2>.

⁷ David Stewart Nash, "William Morris."

⁸ Thompson, 391.

western industrialization.⁹ Workers increasingly used the city as grounds for protest and activism. Working-class Londoners demonstrated in large numbers for political causes important to them in Trafalgar Square in the 1880s, when working-class citizens would march “under the silken banners of trade unions and socialist societies that proclaimed workingmen’s rights to civic participation, as producers of wealth and as respectable patresfamilias.”¹⁰ Working-class Londoners tended to remain in their neighborhoods and communities, not venturing outside of spaces deemed acceptable for them at the risk of arbitrary arrest. Political demonstrations that utilized parts of the city not typically considered welcoming for the working-class represent the use and reformation of space as a compelling political tactic of the era.¹¹ May Day demonstrations must be understood within a broader context of politicized space in fin-de-siècle London, where working-classes were far from welcomed everywhere. Thus, a march or movement through the city in pursuit of political goals represents a meaningful reclamation of the space.

A broad intersection of scholarly work covers International Labor Day, May 1, 1890, and the conditions leading up to it. Judith Walkowitz addresses the lives of working-class Londoners and working-class urban space at the end of the nineteenth century with an emphasis on gender and sexual dynamics; the context she **enlists** in setting up her argument provides useful information for understanding life for working-class Londoners.¹² Eric Hobsbawm’s scholarship examines both the global development of working-class life and politics in the period.¹³ Hobsbawm also identified May Day specifically as significant in understanding the nuanced

⁹ Hobsbawm, *Age of Empire*, 112.

¹⁰ Judith Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 41-42.

¹¹ Walkowitz, 41-42.

¹² Walkowitz, 41.

¹³ For more information, see Hobsbawm *Age of Empire* chapter “Workers of the World.”

dynamics of working-class politics and legacies, with in-depth analysis of the nuances of May Day demonstrations in 1890 across the globe.¹⁴ Chris Wrigley’s extensive scholarship on London’s first May Day discusses the origins and motivations, political dynamics, cultural roots, and public reactions to the events. His work is incredibly important in understanding the full context of *Commonweal*’s coverage.¹⁵

May Day has a long and rich history that predates its commemoration as a working-class holiday in 1890; the demonstration has its roots in spring celebrations with festivals, wreaths, and maypoles. While May Day became associated with labor demonstrations in 1890, May Day celebrations in the first days of the month was a tradition with ““pre-Christian” roots.¹⁶ The folkly springtime iconography of the original May Day holiday was also a major part of the labor May Day. Even while labor demonstrations could be considered “counter-culture [...] this alternative culture derived much from the traditions and practices of the old order that the labor movement sought to supercede.”¹⁷ The Second International Congress, a socialist conference which met in Paris in 1889, passed a resolution calling for international labor demonstrations on May 1, 1890.¹⁸ Chicago’s 1886 Haymarket demonstrations inspired, at least in part, the resolution.¹⁹

¹⁴ Eric Hobsbawm, *Uncommon People: Resistance, Rebellion, and Jazz* (New York: The New Press, 1998), 125, <https://archive.org/details/uncommonpeople00eric/page/126/mode/2up>.

¹⁵ Wrigley, “May Days and After.”

¹⁶ Chris Wrigley, “May Days and After,” in *History Today* v.40 no.6, 1990, <https://login.proxy048.nclive.org/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=f5h&AN=9007020721&site=ehost-live>.

¹⁷ Wrigley, “May Days and After.”

¹⁸ Victor Devinatz, “May Day” in *Encyclopedia of Activism and Social Justice*, ed. Gary Anderson and Kathryn Herr, (California: SAGE Reference, 2007) 918. <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX2660300505/GVRL?u=nclivedc&sid=bookmark-GVRL&xid=5f665c76>.

¹⁹ In 1886, a group of American anarchists attempted to bomb police during labor demonstrations in Chicago. The anarchists were given an unjust trial, and a number of them were hanged. International labor demonstrations to acknowledge this group comes in the tradition of international labor demonstrations to honor those killed in the suppression of the Paris Commune in 1871. See Chris Wrigley 37.

Activists also demonstrated as part of a larger push for the implementation of the eight-hour work day, a major labor initiative of the era.²⁰ London's socialist circles did not unanimously agree on the international date of May 1; the Social Democratic Foundation was in favor of a demonstration on Sunday, May 4, in accordance with the desires of the London Trades Council.²¹ On the other hand, the Socialist League "were heartily in agreement with an international May Day."²² This conflict represents a broader tension in late nineteenth century socialist discourse. Marxist thought working-class identity transcended national identity – "the workers, Marx told them, had no country, only a class."²³ This sentiment struggled in actuality – for the most part, political initiative remained "relegated to the national level: the effective framework of their class consciousness was, except at brief moments of revolution, the state and the politically defined nation."²⁴

Temma Kaplan's discussion of rituals and celebrations in Barcelona at the turn-of-the-century provides a framework for understanding demonstrations in London. Kaplan asserted that in the period, "street rituals were, in fact, the main medium for communicating ideas. Processions [...] provided visual tableaux of different perspectives on the social order and

²⁰ Wrigley, "May Days and After."

Commonweal claims that the purpose of the day as a demonstration for the eight-hour workday is a secondary concern, even calling that demand "accidental, tacked on." The paper painted those demonstrating for the eight-hour day alone as not true socialists, and detrimental to the movement. This fact refines understanding of the motivations behind London's May 1 demonstrations, at least as represented by this Socialist League publication. The ideological divides and nuances of London's socialist organizations at the end of the nineteenth century are complicated and not the topic of this paper.

²¹ E.P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1955), 565.

²² Thompson, 564.

²³ Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire*, 120.

²⁴ Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire*, 129.

were at least as persuasive as any other form of debate.”²⁵ In the same vein as the six “episodes” that Kaplan examines from Barcelona (including the city’s 1890 May Day), a close examination of the use of public space, iconography, and rhetoric on May 1, 1890 in London illuminates understanding of how urban spaces interacted with and reflected vital class and political dynamics present in the city. *Commonweal*’s coverage of working-class demonstrations on May 1, 1890 May Day reflects that the demonstrations embraced working-class reclamation of the city; this mode of political action is notable given tension between domestic and international spheres of action, and the *Commonweal*’s coverage of the events reveal that the day’s demonstrations synthesized the two as international rhetoric manifested in domestic, nation-based action.

It is first important to understand how *Commonweal* framed London’s two competing May Day demonstrations of 1890. The title of the first article of *Commonweal*’s May 10 edition was, simply, “LABOUR DAY.” The article jumps into their defense of the Socialist League’s preference for the May 1, international labor day demonstration. The issue acknowledges that the May 1 demonstration was less attended than May 4, but still asserts that their preferred date was more powerful and representative of true resistance. The author decries the Sunday demonstration as “a means of escape and ready excuse for the cowards and sneaks of the Labour movement” created by individuals who “did not see (or did they see too well?) that the whole value of the event lay in its proof of the capacity of the proletariat of the world for organized and simultaneous effort.”²⁶ Thus, one must understand the May 1 demonstration as international at its core. The central differentiation between May 4 and May 1 celebrations was May 1st’s alignment with demonstrations across the globe. *Commonweal*’s authors found international

²⁵ Temma Kaplan, *Red City, Blue Period* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1992), 13.

²⁶“Labour Day,” *Commonweal*.

working-class solidarity more important than English working class unification and a mass movement that transcended the May 1 versus May 4 disagreement.

The sense of international working-class identification continued throughout the article. The authors also wrote about their aspirations for future May Day celebrations: “May Day was celebrated in London; and it shall be again.”²⁷ *Commonweal* communicated that future May Day celebrations were needed because of their international ramifications: “Our comrades throughout the world may rely upon this.”²⁸ Again, this writing emphasized the centrality of the international dimension of political demonstrations in London. The authors did not foreground the needs of the British working class, but rather stated that British working class action is important primarily as a means of global solidarity. This rhetoric aligns with Hobsbawm and Walkowitz’s characterizations of idealistic (and often limited in practice) internationalism of turn-of-the-century socialists.²⁹

The cover article on May Day ends with the sentiment that May Day is a demonstration of strength and the ability to “break down the barriers that confront us, and enter into the promised land.”³⁰ A desired barrier to transcend is certainly national identity; the entire article has stressed the need for unity and solidarity with workers of other nations. *Commonweal*’s framing of May Day’s influential role in breaking down those barriers demonstrated an emphasis on action inspired primarily by a desire to effect international change and align with the workers of the world in pursuit of global liberation.

It is possible to interpret this rhetoric as a disregard for the domestic dimension of working-class politics: one might read it as a de-emphasis on political action at the state-level

²⁷“Labour Day,” *Commonweal*.

²⁸“Labour Day,” *Commonweal*.

²⁹ See Walkowitz *City of Dreadful Delight* chapter “Contested Terrain: New Social Actors” and Hobsbawm *Age of Empire* chapter “Workers of the World.”

³⁰ “The Labour Struggle: The May Day Demonstration,” *Commonweal*.

since this split in demonstrations led to a less unified and cohesive message from the British working class. However, other details that *Commonweal* provided prove that while deeply imbued with the international spirit, the group of May 1 demonstrators also placed an emphasis on how to best use their immediate community (London, specifically) in order to advocate for change. Despite rhetoric inspired by international working-class consciousness as opposed to uniquely British working-class consciousness, this action manifested locally, with an acute awareness of the importance of localized, nation-based action. Demonstrators were deeply inspired by a sense of global unity, but strove to effectively use localized spaces to make effective political statements. *Commonweal's* description of May 1, 1890 demonstrations, and how working-class protesters used and moved through London reveals this connection.

Six pages into the May 10th edition of *Commonweal*, another article on May Day appeared: "The Labour Struggle." While *Commonweal's* first article on May Day highlights the tension between a preference for a Thursday (May 1) versus Sunday (May 4) demonstration, and the political beliefs that underpinned that decision. On the other hand, "The Labour Struggle" provides insight into the physical details of May 1 demonstrations, as Kaplan provides in her discussion of various similar public events in Barcelona. This article paints a vivid picture of what Thursday, May 1, 1890 looked and sounded like in London. Crowds gathered at the Embankment between Westminster and Blackfriars before the beginning of the procession, with a large police presence. Demonstrators began the walk towards Hyde Park at three thirty, and people joined the procession as it went, eventually becoming "one vast mass of people marching onward."³¹ May Day protests used the entire city as a means of political expression. This fact interacts with Kaplan's analysis of street rituals in metropolises of the late nineteenth century. Kaplan explained how large street demonstrations provided a visual representation of political

³¹ "Labour Day," *Commonweal*.

allegiances and grievances in a time before radio or television; the working class “mass of people” moving through London and sweeping people into its mass as it moved along certainly represents the city as a powerful space for working-class assertion of their political goals and power. As Walkowitz described, for the most part, working-class Londoners in this period remained relegated to their neighborhoods or communities. However, May Day diverged from this norm. May Day demonstrations showed large numbers of working-class men and women moving through the city with purpose – a powerful visual representation of their refusal to be silenced. The description of prominent London spaces, like Hyde Park, revealed how demonstrators had an acute awareness of the entire city, and how to best use it in order to make their political views heard.

Specific information from *Commonweal* about iconography and other details of May 1 demonstrations revealed how two seemingly diametrically opposed ideas: working-class expression of power through reclamation of the city and the primacy of global working-class solidarity are synthesized through May Day demonstrations. The procession continued on its way towards the House of Commons, with “the “Marseillaise” ringing out defiantly.”³² The Marseillaise is the French national anthem, written during the revolution, and a notable symbol of revolutionary resistance.³³ This anecdote provides distinct and explicit evidence of how May Day represented the conflation of two seemingly opposed visions of working-class consciousness. The international nature of the inspiration and rhetoric of the May 1 May Day did not preclude them from acting in alignment with a broader sense of British working-class consciousness. Men without property could not vote in England until the Representation of the

³² “The Labour Struggle: The May Day Demonstration,” *Commonweal*.

³³ “La Marseillaise,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, December 19, 2006, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/La-Marseillaise/additional-info#history>.

People Act of 1918.³⁴ Thus, this demonstration must be understood as an expression of both international and domestic working-class consciousness. A public demonstration directed towards the House of Commons was one of few ways that working-class constituencies were able to apply domestic political pressure. Marching throughout the city and to this symbol of political power represented these groups taking action and initiative in whatever way they could – specifically through a mass demonstration, gathering, and movement, of people throughout London that disrupted everyday life and patterns of the city with noise, large groups, and signs that would not let their message go unheard. The march’s procession towards the House of Commons demonstrated an awareness of specifically British working-class identity, even as demonstrators were heavily-inspired by international working-class solidarity. The newspaper, which clearly had an overwhelming predisposition towards action rooted in internationalism, still urged and found important action within the city and action that put pressure on centers of domestic and localized power. Thus, the anecdote of socialists marching towards the House of Commons while singing the Marseillaise functions doubly: both as evidence of May 1 demonstrations as deeply imbued with a spirit of international working-class consciousness, but as well as an acute awareness of working-class oppression as a national, as well as international issue (with the House of Commons as an institution deserving of political pressure).

The iconography that defined May 1 demonstrations further reflected the synthesis of national and international working-class identity in May Day celebrations. The group had banners that read “Workers of the World, Unite!” written in English, French, and German.³⁵ This iconography provides clear insight into the sentiments that informed working class

³⁴ “1918 Representation of the People Act,” *UK Parliament*, <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/electionsvoting/womenvote/case-study-the-right-to-vote/the-right-to-vote/birmingham-and-the-equal-franchise/1918-representation-of-the-people-act/>.

³⁵ “The Labour Struggle: The May Day Demonstration,” *Commonweal*.

demonstrators on May 1. *Commonweal* only described these banners, placing the emphasis on international unity and class solidarity above national political goals. However, national political goals were still clearly present in the demonstration: even if the iconography of the demonstration was centered on internationalism, it is inescapable that the form this political demonstration took was a working-class occupation of London. Urban protests are not a given; socialist sentiments taking this form are representative of an acknowledgement of the power of localized and nationalized political solidarity, even when inspired deeply by a more global lens. They also had banners that read “Workers of the World, we Hail you as Brothers!”³⁶ The synthesis of international and national in working-class demonstrations on May 1, 1890 in London is inescapable. On this day, the explicit signs of solidarity and international class unification were on display throughout the city. The purpose, inspiration, and messaging of these demonstrations were all rooted in an international spirit of resistance.

As they marched, demonstrators also flew “the red flag, the emblem of the revolted labour in every land.”³⁷ Again, iconography of the day sought to stress working-class plight as international, and united regardless of national identity. *Commonweal*’s coverage of May Day concludes on this note:

We all hope and trust that now we have begun the battle, next year the workers of London will demonstrate on May Day, and not put it off till the Sunday to please their masters and the reactionary members of the London Trades Council. English workers will then show their solidarity with labour all over the civilized world.³⁸

Once again, *Commonweal*’s coverage of May 1, 1890 reveals an illuminating synthesis between national and international working-class identities in the turn of the century. Working-class and socialist Londoners chose the reclamation of the city as their preferred method of political

³⁶“The Labour Struggle: The May Day Demonstration,” *Commonweal*.

³⁷“The Labour Struggle: The May Day Demonstration,” *Commonweal*.

³⁸“The Labour Struggle: The May Day Demonstration,” *Commonweal*.

activism: they occupied areas not typically welcome to them, sung songs of working-class resistance, and carried signs with meaningful political messages. At every level of discourse, a spirit of international unity informed and infused these demonstrations. While scholars like Hobsbawm and Walkowitz highlight how a struggle of fin-de-siècle working-class politics was the discord between international rhetoric and a need for domestic action, demonstrations on May 1 represent the unification of these seemingly conflicting ideas.

The first four days of May, 1890 in London brought working-class politics and demands to the forefront of the city, as conflicting groups both held demonstrations alongside socialist and working-class parties across the globe. *Commonweal* represented the views of Socialist Leaguers on the issue of May Day, and particularly their passionate internationalism. Even though demonstrations on Thursday, May 1 were not as well attended as those on May 4, they still provide illuminating insight into the status of socialist politics in London in this era. The international informed the national: the concept of global solidarity, and the plight of the workers extending past geographic lines certainly was a potent inspiration for socialist groups as represented in the *Commonweal*. The demonstrations on this day provide a new lens for examining the evolution of working-class politics more broadly at the time, and potential modes of interaction for national and international rhetoric. The information *Commonweal* provided brings to light important information when seeking to understand the European metropolis in the fin-de-siècle. *Commonweal* provides insight into how the city was viewed as a realm of political activism and resistance, as well as how communication, discourse, and relationships with other nations and constituencies inspired mass politics in some regards. May Day celebrations also provide vital insight into the plight of the working-class at the fin-de-siècle; these demonstrations were inspired by deep discontent, and an economic context of oppression and subjugation. May

Day demonstrations have left an impressionable impact. In 1990, at the centennial of the first May Day, historian Eric Hobsbawm wrote that May Day is “perhaps the only unquestionable dent made by a secular movement in the Christian or any other official calendar, a holiday established not in one or two countries, but in 1990 officially in 107 states.”³⁹ Workers, acting within their communities, and inspired by a deep-seated sense of solidarity and unity with those who share their plight across the world, is certainly a tradition that can be understood to extend beyond London, and May 1, 1890.

³⁹Eric Hobsbawm, *Uncommon People*, 113.

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