

# The DOLORES HUERTA LABOR INSTITUTE

An Educational Partnership of the Los Angeles Community College District and Los Angeles Unions

*Moments in the History of Working People:*

## Meaning of May 1

On May 1, 1886, over 300,000 workers in 13,000 businesses across the US walked off the job for the 8-hour day. In Chicago, majority of the industries were shut down when over 40,000 went on strike. On May 4, violence erupted at a rally at Haymarket Square in Chicago. An unknown assailant threw a bomb at the 180 police who marched into the square to disperse the rally and the police responded by firing into the crowd. The event was used to defame the Knights of Labor, the largest labor organization in the U.S. at the time. Despite the lack of evidence, the court indicted eight anarchist worker leaders with conspiracy to murder (Only three of them were even present at Haymarket Square). Four of them were executed. Almost 500,000 people lined the route of the funeral procession. US workers eventually won the right for an 8-hour day and workers in France, Holland, Russia, Italy and Spain took on the struggle. Three years later, the International Socialist Congress declared May 1 to be "International Workers Day." In 1893, the governor of Illinois pardoned the remaining three worker leaders who were alive on the grounds that they were innocent and had endured an unjust trial.

May 1 is officially celebrated as Labor Day in sixty-six countries in the world and unofficially in many more, except the U.S., Canada, Australia and New Zealand. In 1947, a joint session of US Congress declared May 1 as "Loyalty Day" for reaffirmation of allegiance to the US. On May 1, 2006, 1 million people marched for immigrant rights, which was to become the largest march in L.A. history.

*"If you think that by hanging us you can stamp out the labor movement—the movement from which the downtrodden millions, the millions who toil in want and misery expect salvation—if this is your opinion, then hang us! Here you will tread upon a spark, but there and there, behind you and in front of you, and everywhere, flames blaze up. It is a subterranean fire. You cannot put it out. The ground is on fire upon which you stand."*

August Spies, one of the Haymarket Martyrs

*Why do we not celebrate Labor Day on May 1?*

*Why did so many workers in the nation fight to limit the work day to eight hours a day?*

*Samuel Fielden, one of the eight men convicted, once remarked that "whether a man works eight hours a day or ten hours a day, he is still a slave." What did he mean?*

"1886: The Haymarket Martyrs and May Day." <http://libcom.org/history/articles/mayday-haymarket-martyrs/> 12 February 2008; Philip Foner, *The Autobiographies of the Haymarket Martyrs*. New York: Pathfinder Press (1969); David Roediger, "The Haymarket Incident." [http://www.lucyparsonspj.org/haymarket/roediger\\_haymarket.html](http://www.lucyparsonspj.org/haymarket/roediger_haymarket.html) 12 February 2008.