

May Day



Photo by [Arie Wubben](#) on [Unsplash](#)

1) You are going to read an article about the history of International Workers' Day from the *Guardian*.

Before you do, match the words on the left with their definitions on the right.

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| 1. birch wood | a) claim something as your own, when it was really created by others |
| 2. sign and sanction | b) friendly, welcoming |
| 3. make a dent | c) great changes, which cause much difficulty and trouble |
| 4. revival | d) a type of wood that is made from birch trees |
| 5. paraphernalia | e) the crime of betraying your country, especially by trying to overthrow the government |
| 6. upheavals | f) get rid of/erase |
| 7. denounce | g) the official and only way of doing things |
| 8. sedition | h) damage or spoil something |
| 9. treason | i) all the objects needed for a particular activity |
| 10. expunge | j) criticise strongly |
| 11. co-opt | k) make a small amount of change to something |
| 12. convivial | l) the act of trying to persuade others to oppose their government |
| 13. defile | m) renewed interest in something (in biblical terms, also: restoration, rejuvenation) |

2) Read the article. Decide whether these statements are **true**, **false**, or **not mentioned** in the article.

- a) The author believes that (British) newspapers only focus on the pagan history of May Day.
- b) The author believes that the readers of the article probably don't participate in traditional pagan celebrations on May Day.
- c) The author doesn't like that there are no other secular holidays in the official Christian calendar.
- d) In 1890, protests for an eight-hour working day only took place in London.
- e) Thanks to the increase in popularity of trade unions between 1890 and 1900, May Day continued to be a regular day of protest.
- f) Without the tradition of May Day demonstrations, the anti-war movement wouldn't have been as strong during the First World War.
- g) Franco banned May Day whilst he was in power.
- h) The author believes that the Labour party, who made 1st May a bank holiday in 1978, played a role in depoliticising May Day.
- i) The May Day protest in the UK in the year 2000 was extremely violent and militaristic.

May Day is Not About Maypoles: the History of International Workers' Day

Forget the Morris dancers, May Day's roots are in the fight for workers' rights and it has long been a focus for protest

If you see a history of May Day in the newspapers this year, it is most likely to recount the mystical, medieval origins of a pagan fertility festival. And though you may have never seen a maypole in your life, you will be assured that a ribboned piece of birch wood is the sign and sanction of May Day.

Yet this has little to do with the reason that 1 May is celebrated in Britain, or why it is an international holiday. May Day is International Workers' Day. As such, it is – in the words of Eric Hobsbawm – “the only unquestionable dent made by a secular movement in the Christian or any other official calendar”. And its past is more rowdy than is suggested by the imagery of Morris dancers serenely waving hankies and bells around.

1889-1890

The origin of our present holiday lies in the fight for an eight-hour working day, in which cause the leaders of the socialist Second International called for an international day of protest to be held at the beginning of May 1890. They did so just as the American Federation of Labour was planning its own demonstration on the same date. The UK protest actually took place on a Sunday, and in London alone attracted 300,000 protesters to Hyde Park.

1890-1900

Initially, May Day was intended to be a one-off protest, and in some ways quite a solemn affair. But it persisted amid a flourishing of trade unionism. The symbolism of the workers' Easter, of rebirth and renewal, dramatised this experience of revival. And it developed a carnivalesque aspect. May Day did not merely enact internationalism and working class solidarity; it celebrated these things with the familiar paraphernalia of badges, flags, art, sporting events and heavy drinking.

1900-1918

The leaderships of Europe's growing socialist parties were often worried by the threat of repression coming from governments and businesses, and attempted to avoid excessively confrontational demonstrations. But such domesticating tendencies were counteracted by the severity of the social crisis sweeping Europe and the upheavals it produced. Even during the First World War, when protest was punishable by imprisonment and hard labour, May Day demonstrations were often flashpoints of anti-war struggle. It was at such a rally that Karl Liebknecht denounced the war before 10,000 striking workers at the Potsdamer Platz on 1st May 1916. In Britain, following the arrest of the Scottish socialist John MacLean for sedition in 1918, Glasgow workers embarked on a mass May Day strike and protest.

1918-1945

European governments alternately preferred repression or co-option of May Day after the First World War. The traditional parties of the right tended to prefer repression, or the threat of repression. For them, regarding the jubilant May Days in revolutionary Russia with unease, the whole thing stank of treason. Fascist parties had a more ambivalent attitude, largely because unlike the traditional right they needed the support of a layer of workers. The Third Reich declared 1 May a "national workers' day" in 1933. But the original meaning of May Day reappeared at the darkest moments of the Nazi era, as when it was celebrated in the Warsaw ghetto, which launched an uprising against the regime. Fascist Italy abolished May Day, expunging the radical working class traditions it embodied, but it also introduced a labour holiday on 21 April. Franco, who arguably waged the most vicious military struggle against the left in Spain, and who wiped out 200,000 in executions and concentration camps in the five years after his victory, simply outlawed May Day. It was not celebrated again until his downfall in 1975.

1945-2000

In the post-war period, May Day was generally tolerated and in some cases even recognised as a public holiday. In the UK, 1 May was made a bank holiday by the Labour government in 1978. In some cases, this was part of a process in which organised labour was co-opted, resulting in the holiday becoming an observed ritual and little more. But it continued to inspire astonishing upheavals – May Day protests played a significant role in the Portuguese revolution of 1974, as well as in the uprisings against apartheid in the 1980s. And even in less dramatic circumstances, it assumed greater importance during periods of turbulence, such as during the miners' strike.

2000-2012

May Day returned as a militant, if convivial, protest in the UK in 2000, due to the convergence of a broad coalition of activists under the rubric of anticapitalism. The combination of seriousness with playful exuberance was arguably in the best traditions of May Day, even if some statues were briefly defiled. The response of police, which was to develop and refine the technique of "kettling" over a number of years, was traditional in a less august* sense.

* The meaning of august here is impressive or well respected.

Adapted from the Guardian article - originally published in 2012 - "May Day is not about maypoles: the history of international workers' day, by Richard Seymour: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/may/01/may-day-history-international-workers-da>