

THE
**Final
Straw**
A WEEKLY ANARCHIST SHOW

The Final Straw is a weekly anarchist and anti-authoritarian radio show bringing you voices and ideas from struggle around the world.

You can send us letters at:

The Final Straw Radio
PO Box 6004
Asheville, NC 28816
USA

Email us at:

thefinalstrawradio@riseup.net
or **thefinalstrawradio@protonmail.com**

To hear our past shows for free, visit:

<https://thefinalstrawradio.noblogs.org>

To support transcription and zine-making efforts which are funded by donations, visit:

<https://thefinalstrawradio.noblogs.org/donate/>

or via Patreon:

<https://www.patreon.com/tfsr>

or via LiberaPay, which does not take a cut of the payments:

<https://liberapay.com/The-Final-Straw-Radio/>

Red May Day,
Green May Day
(with Peter Linebaugh)



The Final Straw Radio
May 1, 2016

dent that Henry the Eighth was a wife beater, wife killer. According to documents of his own age, he killed 78,000 people on the gallows. This isn't the demonize him particularly, but it's to show at the birth of the modern British state, its project was misogynist, it was enclosing, and then it became slaving. These are the basis of capitalism as we know it. Misogyny, or patriarchy, enclosure, or destruction of the commons, and privatization and slavery. I hope everyone has a great May Day.

TF SR: I really hope so too. Well, thanks for the inspiring conversation. I guess we should maybe get out there and start commoning, right?

PL: Well, people are doing it all over. We have to do it just to survive. Whether we like it or not, whether it's ideological or not. Poverty requires us to. Either that or suicide. On that happy note... [laughs]

TF SR: Well, Peter, thanks a lot for talking. I enjoyed the book and look forward to reading more of your stuff. Have a great time up in Michigan.

We're happy to share another past episode, this time from May Day 2016, about 4 months before the start of our rss feed for our podcast. I feel it's notable that this show approaches it's 13th birthday on the May 9th of this year.

In this show, you'll hear an interview with autonomous Marxist historian, Peter Linebaugh on essay collection *The Incomplete, True, Authentic and Wonderful History of May Day* plus some music we curated at the time.

Search for this interview title at <https://thefinalstrawradio.noblogs.org/> to find links to further resources on this topic, featured music, the audio version, and files for printing copies of this episode.

TFSR: I'm speaking with Peter Linebaugh. Mr. Linebaugh is a Marxist, a historian, and an author. His most recent book is a compilation of essays called *The Incomplete, True, Authentic, and Wonderful History of May Day*, out from PM Press. Peter, thanks for taking the time for this chat.

Peter Linebaugh: You're welcome.

TFSR: So May Day is this coming Sunday, when we'll be airing this episode of the show. For listeners that are out there who may not know can you sketch some of the history of this great and widely celebrated day?

PL: Yes! I like the way you say that it's great and widely celebrated because for so many American years, it was never celebrated. The ruling class just hated that day. Because it was a day of no work. It was a day to enjoy the springtime. It was a day to go outside. Hooray, hooray! The first of May! Outdoor loving begins today. That's the spirit of the day. It goes back to the first agricultural civilizations around the great rivers, the Neolithic Revolution. It's springtime. It's a time for fertility. I'm speaking from Ann Arbor, Michigan, and the whole world is budding and flowering right now. I imagine that's somewhat past in North Carolina.

TFSR: It's a very sexy place here in North Carolina. There's there's pollen in the air and a lot of people are suffering from it, but...

PL: So anyways, it was a major pagan festival and survived through years of dominant religions. The State of England, under the Tudors, they forbade it. They made it criminal to hoist a maypole because people would dance around the maypole as part of community celebration and fertility, as you say.

For us in North America, the date to remember is 1627 when Thomas Morton set up a maypole in Quincy, MA, and Native American people and runaway servants and former slaves and antinomians from England, they danced around that maypole. The first poem ever made in the USA was there. I'll quote it "with the proclamation that the first of May, at Marymount shall be kept a holy day."

So that's 1627. The Puritans from Boston came down and shut it down with force of arms. Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote a wonderful story about it, thinking it was the crossroads of American history. We could have gone one way and been happy with the maypole and the spirit that it represented among different kinds of people. Multicultural we'd say today. Or it could have gone the other way, the way of domination, hierarchy, endless war, and endless work.

That brings us to the second major aspect of the day, which we need to celebrate with a different kind of seriousness, and that's the struggle for the eight-hour day and the massacre of socialists, anarchists, white, indigenous and African Americans in Chicago, back in 1886 at the famous scene at Haymarket. That came

PL: Yes, thank you.

TFSR: As a historian, much of your written work has focused on the idea and the history of the commons, or at least that's an idea that you seem to have played with a lot and documented, from which we draw May Day is a pagan holiday in the European context. Can you talk a bit about what the commons were and the enclosure of that and what you think May Day opens up in terms of the opportunity of the commons?

PL: Yeah, the basic thing about what May Day opens up is that the earth belongs to all. I talked about skipping and dancing on May Day, but the Earth as our sacred habitat, the Earth as Turtle Island, the earth as a place of abundance and joy to share with all kinds of creatures. The way to celebrate that is to climb over the fence, or to go under it or around it or through it, because the enclosures, the privatization of the earth, to produce the incredibly weird fiction that a person can own the earth, or part of it, this needs to change. It's only in the United States, really, that private property is like this and is enforced with weapons. "Keep Off" and "No Trespassing" signs. Anyone who's flown, you look down from the air, you see that the whole land is turned into squares or rectangular grids. This is what the founding fathers did. They privatized the common, they privatized the free land where people had lived, hunted, farmed, and gathered for for centuries.

That is the commons in terms of North America, in terms of Europe, and especially England, which which I studied carefully because, well, I grew up in England, and that's what I studied and taught. The enclosure of the village commons, the enclosure of common field agriculture, became the basis of the capitalist mode of production, as we say. It began under Henry the Eighth, who everybody knows because he killed his wives. But he's the one who took a fifth of English land and sold it off, privatize it, just the way George Washington and them did several hundred years later in the 1790s to North America. They surveyed it with a theodolite and the tools of the surveyor, laid down their lines, and said, "This is mine," and threw off everyone else who had lived on it. Thus creating the proletariat, as well as agribusiness.

But the commons are a basis of community. People long for community, they long for useful work, so they long for the commons, to share the earth and to share the means of subsistence, the means of production. This is what I meant earlier, when I said, "We demand the whole economy." Because we really need to rest, to stop being quite so busy, to stop driving for profit, stop driving for "development," to stop driving for "progress." Progress for whom? Progress for the 1%. The rest of us need to rest. This is why Sunday and May Day is so important. There used to be hundreds of holidays every year, but the capitalist enterprise and puritanical beliefs shut down those holidays. We're lucky to have... I was gonna say one a weeK—— Sunday, but that's not even true anymore.

So, community, time of work, is all tied to the commons. It's not an acci-

May Day is a day when we need to think deeply about this and to do it with our neighbors. To do it with all kinds of folks, everybody, all workers, all working people who belong to our class of the precariat, students, servers need to be involved in this discussion, as well as farmworkers and undocumented workers. Undocumented workers are so important because they bring the experience of other countries, and they bring also revolutionary experience from other countries. So we have a lot to learn from them.

Anyway, so I'm hoping to learn something myself by meeting some new friends this coming Sunday in Detroit. By the way, I was asking you about the lunch counter sit-ins in North Carolina. I asked you that for a purpose because I think there was an earlier lunch counter sit-in for the same goal of integrated lunch counters here in Ann Arbor, MI, in the 1920s led by Lenore Smith from Mississippi. We learned this by studying May Day in our own locality. I urge all your listeners to study May Day in your locality, to talk to old timers, to search out the old records, even to consult the occasional historian and see what they know and what they remember to bring this back to life.

One way of doing this is a wonderful book by Dave Roediger called the Haymarket Scrapbook, which I recommend. James Green wrote a very good book too called Death in the Haymarket. These are essential readings for those who want to go back to that, those crimes at Haymarket, when the police and the state came down so heavily on the workers, their press, their leaders, and their families, and jailed and hanged so many. In some ways, it's a sad day.

TF SR: In the Ann Arbor experience that you're talking about, in the second to last essay you wrote between 1923 and 1928, the Negro Caucasian Club was involved in some of these strikes, right? If listeners want to pursue further.

PL: Right, just get a friendly competition going between your state and Michigan.

TF SR: Competing for who gets the title of first lunch counter sit-ins?

PL: Yes, against segregation. Because of course, the North is so full of Jim Crow, even worse in many ways.

TF SR: Yeah, just kind of a different accent...

PL: They're not poisoning the waters down in North Carolina, as far as I can see.

TF SR: Well, I don't know, when you get coal ash ponds that are overflowing into the rivers, or the leaking of chemicals from coal production. Or in Louisiana with cancer alley. I mean, they're doing it to us everywhere.

as a direct result of a police shooting of workers at the McCormick works. McCormick made the mechanical reaper that brought industry and machines to the earth, to the plains, to cutting grass, cutting grain. Those workers had gone on strike for an eight-hour day, and the police shot them and killed one. In response, the people of Chicago called for a meeting to discuss the issue at Haymarket, where farmers brought in hay for the horses. At that meeting, just a few days after May Day, 1886, a stick of dynamite was thrown. To this day, no one knows whether it was a police provocateur or a misguided anarchist or what. But anyway, there was casualties, including demonstrators, as well as the policemen.

As a result, tremendous repression came down all across the US, not just in Chicago. Seven people were found guilty after a kangaroo trial, and four of them were actually hanged on the 11th of November 1887. We should remember their names: Albert Parsons, we know him especially because of his wife, Lucy, who went on living and carrying the message of the eight-hour day and a workers struggle right into the 1930s. August Spies, before he hanged, he said, "There will come a time when our silence will be more powerful than the voices you strangled today." That's been the case. Their silence is powerful, and all of us around the world celebrate and remember those workers, those martyrs, as they're called in Mexico.

The ruling class of the United States tried to put an end to the celebration right away. They made an into Law Day. Eisenhower did that. Then they made the workers' holiday, Labor Day, in September to get it far away from May Day, when workers all over the world celebrated. They wanted to divide US workers from world workers.

I have to admit that they succeeded. People forgot May Day except for a few anarchists in the 1920s. Then in the '30s and '40s, the Communist Party kept up the tradition of May Day. But the Communist Party, worldwide anyway, associated the day with militarism, and it became something in the Cold War. This gives another reason why, in the United States, we've tended to forget that day. Until 2006, when tens of thousands of undocumented workers, most Spanish speaking, flooded the streets of Chicago again, and of Los Angeles and other towns, calling for justice for this new underclass of people denied basic rights as workers or citizens.

While I should also say, my book is called incomplete, because the hope of May Day has not been realized. We still are fighting not only for the eight hour day, but for equality, not equality of opportunity, but equality of economic conditions. I think we should fight this year to own the whole economy, not leave it just to the 1%. It should belong to us all, and we need to reconstitutionalize ourselves, reconstitute ourselves. But now I'm going off on my own views. I hope that gives your listeners some idea of the importance of May Day in the past, especially as it concerns North America.

TF SR: That was a really lovely outline that you just offered. I love the way that in the book you connect themes such as the displacement of indigenous

people prior to the period, the Gilded Age of the Haymarket, when the Haymarket affair occurred, the clearing of the pastures, the killing off of buffalo and other residents of the great grasslands of the Midwest, then the connection to the McCormick works creating the reaper that just decimated the grasslands themselves.

PL: Yeah, just produced a buzz cut, didn't it? Then as a result, we had the Dust Bowl because it was so bad for the soil: monoculture.

TFSR: **The essays in the book range from 100 years after the Haymarket, basically 1986 to 2015. From the oldest to the newest, you make the claim a few times that May Day has both a green and a red side. What do you mean by this, and why do you think it's important to remind people of that?**

PL: Well, the green side now, as we're talking in 2016, with the melting of the ice caps, the pollution of the Pacific Ocean, the destruction of species has a greater meaning, I think, than it did when I first conceived of the idea in the '80s. The notion of the green is the notion of photosynthesis, now that I think about it, the relationship of the sun to vegetation. Of course, vegetation is the basis of animal life, so really, all of life depends on... Well, I'm not a biologist, but a great deal of life depends on the green, depends on photosynthesis and chlorophyll. So there's a literal meaning of green, but there's also a symbolic meaning of green, which is the joy of living, the joy of life. In contrast to the red. Red I used signify blood and to signify struggle, especially class struggle, and thinking of the red flag of battle.

May Day is a holiday that spans both these notions. It can be both a family day of picnicking, outdoors preferably, and of dancing, and it can be a day of marching and a day of militants, a day of taking back the world that has been dis-commoded and dis-greened (if I can use that phrase), turned into asphalt, turned into concrete. So it's had both the green and the red. I mean, the green has led to the Anthropocene. It's led to geological changes of the planet. I think we can restore it, not to the way it was, but to the way it could be, only by a red struggle, only by a mass struggle. I believe people are interested in that and see the necessity of it all over the world.

Anyway, so that's kind of the red and the green, but I think it's up to your readers and listeners to give to these symbols their own meanings from their own experience.

TFSR: **Yeah, definitely you leave it with a lot of space for interpretation but draw out some lovely conclusions of your own.**

How have you seen the celebration of the day change throughout your lifetime? You mentioned that through the '20s it was remembered by a number of anarchists activists, and through the 1930s, '40s, and '50s communists in the United States... Just to interject right here, my first May

Day that I celebrated was in San Francisco in 2000 during the anti-globalization era, as people call it. There was a giant maypole that was raised and a number of speaker and at the same time a big open-ended pagan celebration and picnic that led to a march eventually. It was really beautiful tying together what you seem to describe as the green and the red. And the marches of 2005 and 2006, as you mentioned.

Can you talk a little bit about how you've seen May Day in the popular imagination during your life?

PL: Yeah, I just know my own part of it. I love to hear about that San Francisco May Day. That sounds grand and beautiful. And I love to hear about the immigrant ones, the undocumented worker ones in 2005 and 2006. For me, May Day, an important day is always May 2nd because then I tune into the radio or read the newspaper, or now I guess we have the internet, to see who else in the world has turned out. May Day was so important in bringing down apartheid in South Africa and is still a major day of struggle in South Africa. It's that way in so many parts of the world. On May 2nd it's just a good time to check in and see what's going on.

But for me, it began as a historian in Rochester. We thought let's try to have a picnic and make it a family day and have some speeches and then sing songs. That's the way it worked there. Then later, I moved to Boston, and we had different forms of May Day. I remember in Jamaica Plain on May Day we joined a festival called Wake Up The Earth. So on all these occasions I would meet people, old timers who had participated in Union Square in New York, for instance, and in May Day celebrations of the '40s. Then here in Washtenaw County, in Southeast Michigan, ever since I've lived here, we try to have a picnic, or we have a commons, or we teach children how to dance around the maypole. This year, I think, folks for Black Lives Matter and folks from other social change outfits will probably go to Detroit to join a picnic and march in so called Motor City, which now I guess is known, not as a rust belt, but as a place of urban gardening.

It's important to do that because the powers that be have been poisoning the waters, as you perhaps have heard of, up in Flint, MI. It's just a crime what the rulers of our country are doing. We need to bring them to justice to pay for their crimes. Not by long prison sentences. I'm certainly not in favor of that because we need to open the prisons, if anything. But we need to find other ways of making them pay. That is, we need reparations. The main reparations that must come must restore equality. So the riches, the ill gotten gains of the 1%, either they must voluntarily turn them over, or they must be made to do it. That can only be done I think with justice and mass mobilization.

At the moment our mobilizations can't be that great, but it's growing. It's growing bursts. People are wondering, "What is anarchism? What is socialism? What is the political revolution?" These are questions raised by Bernie Sanders, and not to support him, but the questions are important. The discussion that results from them is important, and May Day should be a day to have those discussions.