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

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

The Final Straw Radio
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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.

TFSR: 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]

TFSR: 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.

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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 flower-
ing 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 domi-
nant 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 run-
away 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, think-
ing 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

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 privatiza-
tion 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
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 found-
ing 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 En-

TFSR: What 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 En-

PL: Yes, thank you.

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

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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.

TFSR: 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.

TFSR: 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.

TFSR: Yeah, just kind of a different accent...

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

TFSR: 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 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 a law in 1884, that in 1926, 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.

TFSR: 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-commodified 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 the waters, as you perhaps have heard of, up in Flint, MI. It’s just a crime what the water company did. But for me, it began as a historian in Rochester. We thought let’s try to join 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 rich 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.