

How Labour Day Affects YOU

The effectiveness of organized action of the international labour movement was again highlighted just last week, when South African trade unions, represented by the South African Transport and Allied Workers' Union (affiliates of the International Transport Federation - ITF), refused to unload a ship allegedly carrying a cargo of arms, to be used in a conflict-ridden area in Africa. However, in the same period during which we saw these men and women standing up for social peace, we also witnessed the murder of Honduran trade unionists, and the disappearance of a union leader in Colombia.

By placing their lives and livelihoods on the line for the cause of peace, social justice and the common good, trade unionists worldwide find themselves the targets of harassment, detention and even death. In its most recent Annual Survey of Violations of Trade Union Rights, the International Trade Union Confederation noted an alarming rise in the number of people killed due to union activities: from 115 in 2005 to 144 in 2006.

With problems continuing in the Americas, and a significant increase in deaths in both Asia and Africa, the violation of trade union rights is becoming an increasingly global phenomenon. Nearly 5,000 trade unionists were arrested in 2006, over 800 were subjected to torture, beatings or other bodily injuries, and more than 8,600 reported being fired for their union activities.

The origins of May Day 1886 may seem like ancient history to us today, but they are firmly rooted in a global effort to memorialize the struggle for workers' rights, and the sacrifices made by our predecessors to win these rights.

On this day in Chicago, tens of thousands of working people marched in the streets calling for the 8-hour day. The peaceful demonstration was a success, and was followed by hundreds of thousands of workers across the United States going out on strike. However, in Chicago, events turned bloody, with several days of demonstrations, police repression and rioting resulting in hundreds of casualties, and many deaths. In the aftermath of the Haymarket Square incident, eight union leaders were tried for murder and, with one exception, were sentenced to death. Four were eventually executed, although the identity of the individual responsible for inciting the violence by throwing a bomb at police was never determined.

It is in memory of the Martyrs of Chicago, and all those who fall for the cause of freedom of association and protection of workers' rights, that May 1st is an international day of action.

For officials of the International Labour Office, this day cannot be ignored. More than 120 years after the Haymarket massacre, there remains a great deal to be done before we can say that we have achieved Decent Work, social justice and respect for International Labour Standards.