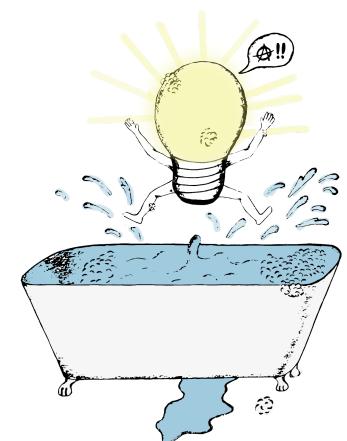


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"The chiefest of murderers, the Government, its own hands red with the blood of hundreds of thousands, assumes to correct the individual offender, enacting laws to define the varying degrees of his offense and punishment, and putting beautiful building stones to very hideous purposes for the sake of cageing and tormenting him therein... We have punished and punished for untold thousands of years, and we have not gotten rid of crime, we have not diminished it." —Voltairine de Clayre



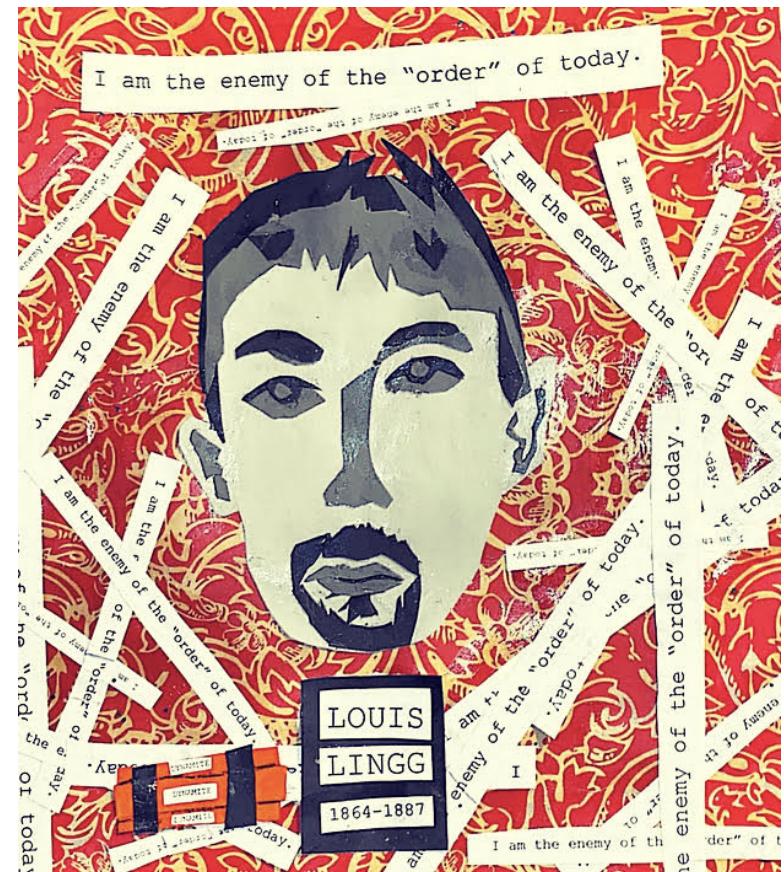
# THE BIG IDEA

A Semi-Monthly Publication

## 136 YEARS AND THE HAYMARKET MARTYRS LIVE ON

When charged with the so-called crime of protecting workers from a police riot—a bomb thrown into the middle of the menacing ranks of almost two hundred cops—one of the Chicago Martyrs, Louis Lingg, presented a remarkable alibi that boiled down to this: "I couldn't possibly have thrown that bomb. I was home at the time making bombs to throw!" In other words, had there been one ready, he would have gladly flung it. (In 1893, a blushing Illinois governor posthumously pardoned him to save the state further embarrassment.) Nor did he go quietly when the fuzz showed up at his house to arrest him, drawing a pistol to try to shoot them. Wanting to die on his own terms, and not the state's, the night before his execution Lingg bit down on a blasting cap smuggled into his cell. Blowing off his face. He was only 23.

He concluded a vehement speech in court like so: "I tell you frankly and openly, I am for force. I have already told [police] Captain Schaack, 'if they use cannons against us, we shall use dynamite against them.' I repeat that I am the enemy of the 'order' of today, and I repeat that, with all my powers, so long as breath remains in me, I shall combat it... You laugh! Perhaps you think, 'you'll throw no more bombs'; but let me assure you I die happy on the gallows, so confident am I that the hundreds and thousands to whom I have spoken will remember my words; and when you shall have hanged us, then—mark my words—they will do the bombthrowing! In this hope do I say to you: I despise you. I despise your order, your laws, your force-propelled authority. Hang me for it."



Right: Album cover of >...*Checking System...Disruption Detected...* by anarchist punk band Louis Lingg and the Bombs. Feeling the Martyrs were becoming forgotten, the band memorialized one of them. Check out their rad discography! Cover art by Bandit Bandit at [www.banditbanditstudio.com](http://www.banditbanditstudio.com). Lettering design by Mike Gregoire. Left: Collage depiction of Louis Lingg by Halsey Hyer.

### The May Day You've Never Heard About

*an interview with Mel Packer*

May Day 1971, is one of those critical moments in US history that somehow elude most history books. The anti-war movement had reached a fever pitch. In 1968, Richard Nixon won the presidential election on the promise of "an honorable end to the war in Vietnam." In his first two years, he had only escalated—even expanding it to Cambodia in April 1970 and Laos in February 1971.

On Saturday, March 1st, 1971, a bomb placed by members of the Weather Underground went off in a men's bathroom under the Senate Chamber, causing major panic. A deep voice over the telephone gave advance warning, claiming it was "in retaliation for the Laos decision."

Congress had only been bombed once before, in 1915, also an anti-war gesture.\*

Meanwhile, as half the country seethed over the war, the Mayday Tribe—a coalition that included the Yippies—was putting together the final touches on a massive demonstration in the capital set to begin May 1st. Their motto was: "If the government won't stop the war, we'll stop the government." Organizers flocked around the country urging the politically committed to form affinity groups, cells of 4-5 people—thousands of them—that would operate autonomously in an effort to paralyze Washington, D.C.

A young Mel Packer had moved to Pittsburgh from Connecticut several years earlier and worked in a Teamster-organized shop. Engaged in revolutionary politics, he militated in civil rights and anti-war struggles affecting many other working-class youth. He recalls going to a meeting with national organizer Rennie Davis\*\* and, from there, creating his affinity group. The mass meeting took place at CMU. When some in the crowd demurred that such an action as shutting down the capital might be too soon, that it was too drastic, Mel stood up. "It's not too soon, folks," he said. "Tensions are rising. It wouldn't surprise me if someone tried to burn down buildings on campus!" Coincidentally, someone had thrown a couple of Molotov cocktails on the roof of a building across from their meeting!

Mel arrived in the DC area around May Day and witnessed the preparations. Tens of thousands camped out near the Potomac in anticipation. While the Mayday Tribe had secured a protest permit, the police surreptitiously canceled it to easily charge participants. Mel

saw a large building set aside to serve as the medical headquarters for protesters, staffed by volunteer med students, well-stocked and furnished. He heard that cops broke in and "methodically smashed" every piece of equipment. With plenty of anticipation, police



were in full force, amassing 14,000 police, national guardsmen, and soldiers (including members of the 82nd Airborne Division). He also remembers that "some congressmen announced they would canoe in on the Potomac" because they couldn't get to the work otherwise.

But even with tons of notice, the forces of order badly misjudged the protesters. Many more arrived than estimated. And their tactics worked spectacularly. The idea was to "keep the cops on the run" and "just keep fucking up the city as much as we could... People bought \$50 junk cars, drove them to DC and trashed them in the underpasses, turned them upside down, and in some cases, lit them on fire." Others rented U-hauls to clog the tunnels all the more, slashing their tires so they could only be moved with difficulty. Meanwhile, "roving bands of



people who just moved around the city nonstop [were] putting cars on the roads, putting dumpsters on the roads. Those were the days when you could lift Volkswagen bugs," with just a few people. Their wide availability made them easy use for protesters to further

jam transportation. But Mel also noticed that many cars they had relocated later had their windows smashed. Knowing that was not protesters' work, he pulled a camera crew from a major news network that filmed police breaking the car windows of one VW bug before pushing it back to the side of the road—a false flag operation. This event went on for days as affinity groups ran in all directions, with the police and national guard disoriented, unable to establish order.

One protestor later described the atmosphere: "The scene was midway between a sham battle and a war of death. Police vans careened around corners, frantic to discharge their human load and return for another. Helicopters chopping overhead made us aware that the ground troops had surveillance of all our movements." Another reported, "Anytime you stood still you'd be arrested, so you had to keep moving."

At one point, two cops chased Mel and his team until they heard a blood-curdling scream. They turned only to see that one cop had fallen on his club, which had slammed into his eye socket. Basic compassion overcame them, and they rushed to aid the officer, only to be shooed away by the other flatfoot.

To editorialize for a moment, a unified top-down movement of this scale would have been easily infiltrated, their leadership arrested, and the action easily destroyed. (In fact, the CIA had planted a spy named Salvatore Ferrera in the Mayday Tribe, but he was unable to communicate anything useful precisely because of the action's

decentralization.) But quiescent, hierarchical, and non-spontaneous are precisely the kind of actions NGOs, big labor unions, non-profit community groups, and professional organizers feel comfortable with—ones that *they* can easily control, from messaging to action-execution. Which translates to actions that the *state* can easily control. This notion underscores the value of scouring our history, particularly those made obscure, like this one from 1 May 1971. The vitality of the anti-labor movement has never been felt since, not even at the height of the anti-Iraq War protests.

Mel explains that "I'd become a radical through the Vietnam War. I didn't become a radical through reading Marx or Lenin, believe me." Being working class had given him a class consciousness through basic "life lessons." Martin Luther King, Jr. was killed on Mel's 23rd birthday. Epilepsy as a child had given him a medical exemption from the draft, so when he protested against the war, it wasn't to save his own skin. Before the May Day action, and during a large local anti-war protest, he and two other friends walked into the William S. Moorhead Federal Building in downtown Pittsburgh, dressed as Vietcong and wielding toy machine guns, pretending to mow everyone down. (A similar action today would surely get you shot on sight!) They

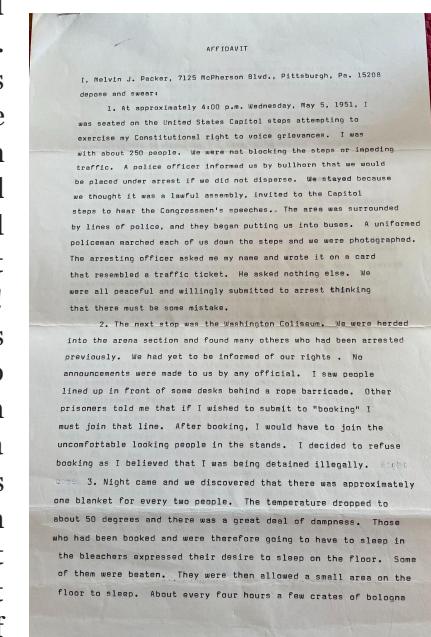


were thrown in a SWAT team van and driven around town for an hour in the baking heat rather than taken straight to jail. Then the cops sprayed them with mace through the holes until one of Mel's friends had a seizure. As he recalls, the charges were dropped, or he paid a fine. (He later ran into one of the SWAT team members that had arrested him. The man had quit in disgust. During a heart-to-heart, he asked the man why he was a cop. "Because it's a lot safer than working in a steel mill, Mel.")

The Nixon administration was left disoriented and rattled by the protests, compounded by how close to home they hit. At one point, "Julie Nixon, a visiting [former First Lady] Mamie Eisenhower, and others were sent screaming from a lunch in the White House family dining room when a tear gas canister was set off by security and filled the presidential residence with choking gas."\*\*\*\* Imagine, friendly fire at the White House! It was a May Day miracle.

On Wednesday, May 5th, protestors planned to pack the prisons even more with some civil disobedience. As he testified in an affidavit, at 4pm Mel was seated peacefully with 250 others on the capitol steps. One cop removed "his gun and helmet and joined" protestors. Then came the arrests. One boy was taken from his mother; the government promptly began procedures to strip her of legal guardianship, claiming the child had been "neglected" because—get this—his parent had been arrested! Fortunately, the government lost its case. These protestors refused to comply, forcing police to carry them away physically. Jammed onto a commandeered city bus, Mel was taken to the Washington Coliseum—an important event venue turned into a makeshift prison. He joined hundreds of others detained on previous days. It was cold and damp, with a blanket available to only half the prisoners.

There was little food, mostly "every four hours a few crates of bologna sandwiches arrived." News of these conditions horrified the American public.



Page one of Mel's 8-page affidavit.

During his internment, Mel had the occasion to speak to three cops—one white, two black—for an extended period of time. They told him their entire cadre of police had arrived in a bus to guard the Coliseum, "beating their nightsticks on the floor and chanting 'One, two, three, four, we don't want your fucking war!'" They had "all joined the force in the hope of doing something about the human condition,

but every time they tried to be a human, some lifer cop jumped down their throats." They were so disillusioned "that the only solution they saw to the country's problems was violent revolution!"

"Most of the time, the police were cautious in trying to keep us somewhat separated from the National Guard as they were extremely sympathetic. I never witnessed a single act of violence against a prisoner by a National Guardsman. In fact, [they] raised money for the bail fund and bought us cigarettes." They were all young, most draftees, and anti-war. Some even helped the protesters escape their confinement. For instance, among the arrested were active-duty soldiers who faced court marshals and harsh punishment should they have been booked. To help, National Guardsmen smuggled in extra uniforms that they donned to leave the Coliseum.

The next day, Mel and many others refused to submit to booking. "The police clubbed some people and surrounded others. The pressure points under their ears were pushed until they could no longer stand the pain. Wrists were bent backward until it appeared that they were going to break. The police dragged us up a concrete ramp and off a

concrete platform via a wooden ramp. The drop was about three feet, and some people were thrown off head first... Many people were dragged by their hair." On the long bus ride, "we would receive food and cokes through the windows whenever we stopped, especially in the black community." Mel mused in his affidavit that, "It must be true that oppression tends to breed not only feelings of revolution but also feelings of great compassion for your fellow human beings... The people did not stop the government, but we did show a sample of just how far the government is willing to go to stop the people."

As the bus neared the jail—while the protestors "sang and chanted resistance songs"—it abruptly stopped. "Suddenly we felt liquid coming in through the windows. We had been thoroughly maced" by the police—something that infuriated the jailers, who thought it pointless cruelty. Conditions at the jailhouse were worse than those at the Coliseum, if that was possible. Mel testified, "My cell measured [9 x 14] with one toilet and contained thirty-one people... We had to lie among and on top of each other in order to sleep. I saw one prisoner curled up around the base of the toilet..."

The temperature must have been 100 degrees." Meanwhile, no one had been read their rights, gotten a phone call, or consulted a lawyer. And his cell happened to be one of the least crowded! These conditions were not ameliorated until Friday afternoon (May 7th) and after considerable pressure from without, and resistance from within.

Mel was among the last 106 prisoners that finally agreed to cooperate with the booking process, which included providing their names. Even

then, ten people—one an 80-year-old woman—more stubborn still held out (and, as everyone who's met him knows, Mel is pretty stubborn). "We were all deeply moved... We all wondered if we should be doing the same thing. The chamber was dead silent with only a sea of fists to show our love." As the ten were escorted back to their cells, "The chamber was dead silent." But first, they secured the judge's concession of reading a collective statement before the press.

In the end, police arrested 12,614 people. All charges of unlawful protest were eventually dropped. Police conduct was so horrendous that the government was forced to compensate those imprisoned, prorated by time served. As he remembers it, Mel—among those with the longest stay behind bars—received \$3,500 (the equivalent of \$26,084 today).

One month after May Day, Daniel Ellsberg leaked the *Pentagon Papers* to the press, proving what the anti-war movement had intuited: that the war had been fraudulently sold to the American public. The war was unwinnable for the US, its cost to human life staggering, and any honorable conclusion doubtful. In just a few months, the peace movement had managed to hit the government from every possible direction. Its congressional building had been bombed. Its capital security, unable to keep order, was made into a laughing stock. Protestors—cunning, disruptive, and outright destructive—had been treated inhumanely, deprived of due process, and garnered widespread support; soon, they would laugh all the way to the bank. To boot, the government could not even secure thousands of pages of top-secret files.

\* Former Harvard professor Eric Muenter planted dynamite in the Senate reception area. From there, he went straight to J.P. Morgan's residence and shot him in the stomach and the groin, though he had intended to hold the mogul and his family hostage and negotiate an end to World War I. Sadly, and surprisingly, Morgan did not die. No cheers for Muenter, though. A few years earlier, he had poisoned his wife to death. He committed suicide in prison. See: [David E. Russell, "The Day Morgan Was Shot," Glen Cove Heritage, Accessed 4/26/2023.](#)

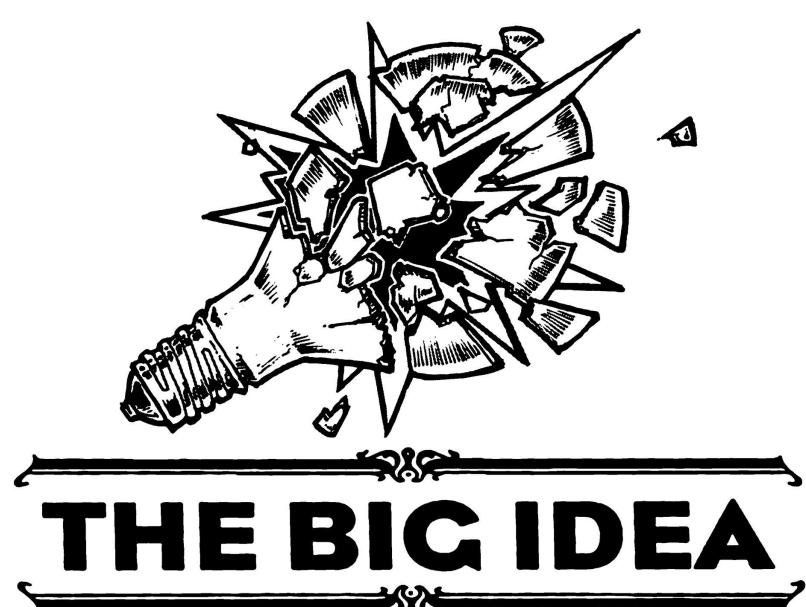
\*\* Rennie Davis was one of the Chicago 7, charged with disrupting the Democratic National Convention in 1968 over the party's hawkishness on Vietnam. He was a tireless anti-war organizer and a member of the Students for a Democratic Society. Following the war, Davis became a devotee of the guru Prem Rawat, a venture capitalist, and a lecturer on self-help. Davis' transformation from an anti-war militant to an enabler of the system he criticized was an oft-repeated pattern for activists of the 1960s and 1970s. Eventually, he came to believe that American institutions were fair and all one needed for the good life was internal individual work.

\*\*\* Garrett M. Graff, *Watergate: A New History* (New York: Avid Reader Press, 2020), 60-62.

\*\*\*\* Lawrence Roberts, *Mayday 1971: A White House at War, a Revolt in the Streets, and the Untold History of America's Biggest Mass Arrest* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2020). L. A. Kauffman, *Direct Action: Protest and the Reinvention of American Radicalism* (London and New York: Verso, 2017). All images of the May Day action are from Getty Images.

### Magnificent Big Idea T-Shirts

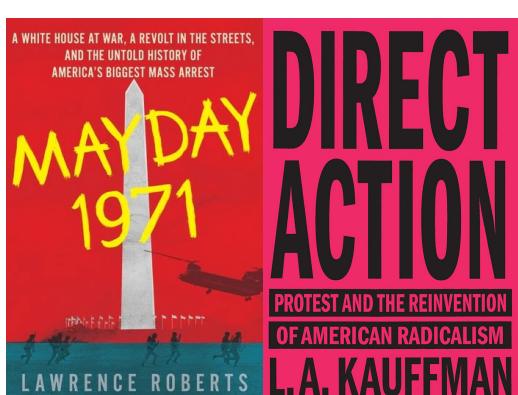
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\* Write a haiku for consideration for another method of acquisition.



Mayday 1971 by Lawrence Roberts and Direct Action, by L.A. Kauffman were important sources for details and corroboration.\*\*\*

"dead silent." But first, they secured the judge's concession of reading a collective statement before the press.

## Reflections on the Government's Derailment of the Railroad Strike, Fall 2022

by Marc J. Mancini

This last fall, exciting events were happening in the US labor movement. Forty-eight thousand academic workers were on strike at the University of California—the largest strike of US academic workers ever and the biggest strike in 2022. On 17 November 2022, Starbucks workers across the country went on a one-day strike, referred to as the “red cup rebellion”—a response to the company’s growing union-busting tactics and refusal to bargain in good faith as organizing exploded across the coffee chain. The Red Cup Rebellion was strategically chosen for November 17th because this happens to be Starbucks’ busiest day of the year; it’s called “red cup day” as the company gives away reusable cups for holiday-themed drinks like the peppermint mocha, or fall-themed beverages such as pumpkin spice lattes. Then Amazon workers rounded out the season across the US and around the world and went on a Black Friday strike to protest dangerous working conditions and low wages.

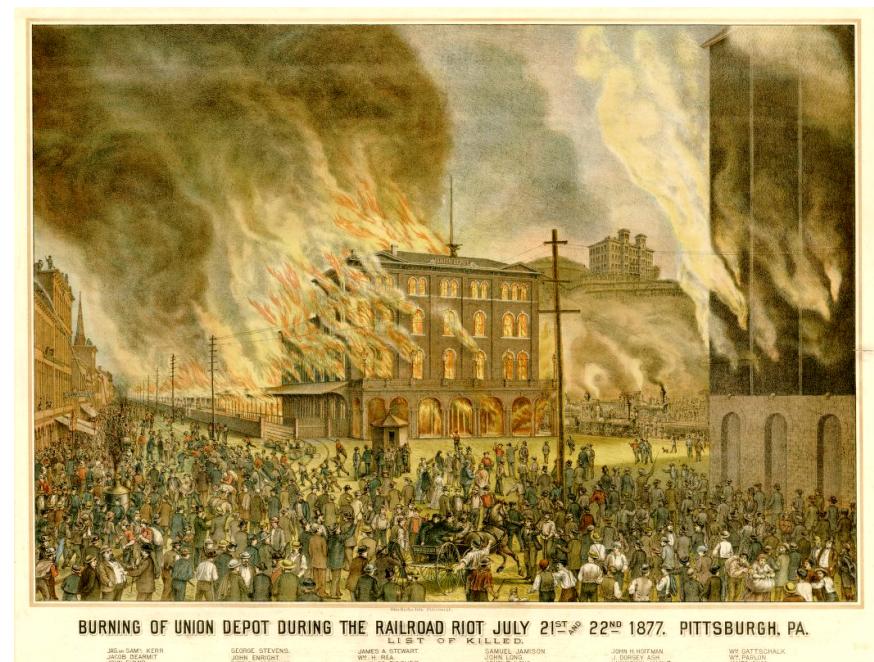
But one of the most significant developments that took place was a threatened railway strike that would have drastically impacted the U.S. and global economy, with estimates of \$2 billion daily lost to the US economy alone. Yet, this possible blow to the capitalist economy was averted with government intervention while the core demands of the railroad workers were ignored. What happened?

To understand the present railroad situation, we must return to the past, including the very beginning of industrial capitalist development in America and the militant worker struggles that went along with it. Contract negotiations covering 115,000 U.S. railway workers began earlier in 2022; these people are suffering the impacts of extreme cost-cutting measures and severe overtime work hours. In the United States, because railroads are still essential components of the national economy, railway unions are covered under a separate, and more controlled, labor law known as the Railway Labor Act of 1926. Railway unions cannot strike during contract negotiations until after they have been “released” by the government to do so, and that comes only after they have exhausted other options—and if Congress doesn’t intervene to block them.

The last national railroad strike took place in 1991. It lasted a single day before Congress and then-President George H.W. Bush sent the strikers back to work. The law is deliberately designed to be a slow process with much government intervention to prevent and deter any railway worker rebellion, which has a rich yet violent history here in the United States dating back to the late 19th century.

In 1877, the “Great Railroad Strike” took place, the result of an economic downturn that led the Baltimore and Ohio (B&O) Railroad cutting wages for the third time in a year. This resulted in militant and violent worker rebellions across the country, including the destruction of railroad cars and the burning of stockyards and railroad facilities. Such militant acts occurred right here in Pittsburgh, which was a major center of the Pennsylvania Railroad at the time. In Pittsburgh, striking workers burned the Union Depot and 38 other buildings at the yards. In addition, more than 120 locomotives and more than 1,200 railway cars were destroyed. The violent actions only occurred after the local authorities ordered the Pittsburgh militia to suppress the peaceful striking workers. But the local militia was sympathetic to the railroad workers and refused to take action. The lieutenant governor then ordered the Philadelphia militia to step in. A shoot-out eventually took place between the two militias, thus leading to the violent worker rebellion (and perhaps the reason so much animosity exists between Pittsburgh and Philadelphia to this day!). Estimates of company damages ranged from \$2 million to \$5 million (\$56,984,761.90 - \$142,461,904.76 in today’s dollars) according to the railroad company and an 1878 report by a state legislative investigative committee. Pittsburgh became the site of the most violence and physical damage of any city in the country. The strike ended 52 days later after militias suppressed it, the National Guard, and federal troops resulting in 40 people, including women and children, being killed in Pittsburgh alone. Local media and populations compared the workers’ rebellions to the revolutionary Paris Commune of 1871—this strike is exactly what the ruling class feared the most. A historical marker stands to this day in the Strip District (located at the traffic island of Liberty Ave. and 28th St.) commemorating the 1877 strike/riot.

Today, the corporate media continues to echo pro-business propaganda emphasizing rising inflation and slowdowns in the global



BURNING OF UNION DEPOT DURING THE RAILROAD RIOT JULY 21<sup>ST</sup> & 22<sup>ND</sup> 1877. PITTSBURGH, PA.

supply chain. Yet little has been said about one contributing factor—the decades-long squeeze that major railroad companies have put on their operations and workers. “Precision Scheduled Railroading” is a business term aimed at cutting costs and increasing profits—basically the railroad version of lean production, which is the capitalist methodology of systematic speedups and job-cutting. It caught on in manufacturing and other industries during the rise of neoliberalism in the late 1970s through the 1980s, continuing to the present.

The railroads have done it by cutting less-profitable routes; closing and consolidating railyards, repairing barns, and other facilities; running fewer, longer trains; and laying off tens of thousands of workers while demanding more from those that remain. Railroads have cut as many as 35% of workers in some titles over the past several years. Meanwhile, on average, individual freight trains were hauling 30% more tonnage in 2020 than in 2000!

All these practices add up to a system that doesn’t function well under pressure—the pressure of a global pandemic, or even just the pressure of normal operations. In stretched-out, just-in-time supply chains with no room for error, delays have a domino effect.

Workers have fewer days off and even more irregular schedules than they’re used to. Longer trains are harder to operate and more prone to derailments.

The railroads have cut back on inspections. They have deferred and outsourced maintenance that was traditionally done by union workers. And they are continuing their push to reduce the crews of these ever-longer trains from two people to one person.

In summary, the railroads have created a crisis: they’ve laid off so many people that many of those who remain consider the situation unbearable. Another example: a new points-based attendance policy was created for the engineers and conductors who already have irregular schedules with inconsistent days off. Conductors and engineers work “on call,” working many days in a row and getting called into work at ridiculous times. Workers have difficulty taking even earned time off, and railroaders do not have any paid sick days, which has become one of the major demands of the workers during negotiations. Under the new attendance system, as one worker described it, after taking off a Saturday and a Sunday together you have to work weeks or months straight, with no day off.

And yet, through all the cost-cutting measures, the increasing demands on workers, and market manipulations like stock buybacks, railroad companies are quite profitable. For instance, Union Pacific (UP) reported in the fourth quarter of 2021 that it had cut costs and increased profits by 23% over the previous fourth quarter—even though its on-time delivery performance was down, fuel prices were up, and it had staffing shortages. In other words, the squeeze on workers had made most of the difference in terms of profitability. Concerned about safety as corners get cut; angered by increased workloads, understaffing, and the totalitarian enforcement of disciplinary policies, railway workers sent a message to the companies and the US government—they’d had enough.

In September 2022, President Joe Biden and Congress intervened and passed legislation that led to a tentative agreement with the railroads and union leadership. That agreement was rejected by more than half of the country's unionized railroad workforce. It does not include a single day of paid sick leave and allows three penalty-free days off per year but for medical visits only. But even that time off is severely restrictive—it's unpaid, it can only be taken on a Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday, and it's to be scheduled at least 30 days in advance.

"These agreements were rejected because the quality of life rail workers and their families have today is abysmal," Ash Anderson, a member of the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees Division (BMWED)—one of the unions that voted against ratifying the tentative deal—wrote on Facebook. "There were no provisions to improve the quality of life for rail workers, who continue to be exploited by companies that are earning record-breaking profits while their service suffers and they cut their workforce to the bone."

Anderson continued: "I just want Americans to see the stories of these men and women, the stories of their families. I want Americans to recognize that these workers are being driven out of their chosen profession by the continued harsh conditions, callous discipline, long hours far from home, and basic lack of respect and dignity in the work that President Biden just stated was too important to allow to stop, regardless of the cost. The railroads' record profit margins are safe, their exorbitant stock buybacks and shareholder returns are secured. Americans [had] all the conveniences available this [last] busy shopping season. Rail workers will work sick to make sure it's all done, because that's what they have to do."

Congress recently had midterm elections. President Joe Biden and the Democratic Party campaigned heavily on pro-labor issues to increase voter turnout and appealed to union workers for their support. Yet, despite President Biden claiming he is the "most pro-union president," on November 28th, 2022, he urged Congress to pass legislation forcing unions to accept a contract agreement without any paid sick days, a step that would avert a nationwide strike while delivering a win for the profitable railroad industry. In a statement, President Biden said, "As a proud pro-labor President, I am reluctant to override the ratification procedures and the views of those who voted against the agreement. But in this case — where the economic impact of a shutdown would hurt millions of other working people and families—I believe Congress must use its powers to adopt this deal." In other words, President Biden knew a nationwide railway strike would severely hurt the capitalist economic system and the profits of the railroads, so he was using the power of the state to stop any worker revolt. So much for being a "pro-labor" president.

In response, Ross Grooters, an engineer and co-chair of Railroad Workers United, an inter-union alliance that supports public ownership of the national rail system, stated, "By forcing workers into an agreement which doesn't address basic needs like healthcare and sick time, President Joe Biden is choosing railroads over workers and the economy." Another worker was more blunt to labor reporter Jonah Furman: "Words cannot express how fucking livid I am at this administration... People in power, LIKE HIM, [Biden] would rather screw workers than stand up to fucking robber barons."

Despite the growing anger amongst the rank 'n file railroad workers, a wildcat strike—one that happens without official union authorization—did not happen. The Biden administration and other labor unions exerted tremendous pressure to derail a work stoppage. Additionally, there are 12 separate railway unions representing different crafts, which severely weakens bargaining power. This is in contrast to having one industrial railway union, to which all railway workers belong, as advocated by the famous labor leader Eugene V. Debs over a century ago. However, a growing rank 'n file organization known as Railroad Workers United (RWU) seeks to organize all railway unions into one and demands public ownership of all railroads. To learn more, or to join RWU, please visit <https://www.railroadworkersunited.org>. (You do not need to be a railroad worker to join RWU—you can join as a solidarity member!)

As a compromise, or for political theater, the Biden administration attempted to pass paid sick days legislation for all workers at the end of 2022, but the votes came up short thanks to the Senate filibuster, which the Democratic Party refused to eliminate despite having a majority in congress for 2 years. Indeed, Biden claimed, "Working together, we have spared this country a Christmas catastrophe in our grocery stores, in our workplaces, and in our communities. I know that many in Congress shared my reluctance to override the union

ratification procedures. But in this case, the consequences of a shutdown were just too great for working families all across the country. And, the agreement will raise workers' wages by 24%, increase health care benefits, and preserve two-person crews." But wage increases and healthcare benefits were not the core demands of workers—their demands were for greater safety and paid sick days, which Congress failed to deliver.

And almost prophetically, the alarm bells railroad workers were sounding went off on 3 February 2023, when a Norfolk Southern freight train that was over 2 miles long, carrying hazardous materials, derailed in East Palestine, Ohio, which released hydrogen chloride and phosgene (a gas used as a chemical weapon in WWI), causing a weeks-long evacuation within a 1-mile radius, and untimely the deaths of many pets and local wildlife. As stated, the railroad industry's relentless pursuit of profit and executive compensation, labor and safety cutbacks, short-staffing, and a generally overburdened workforce resulted in devastating consequences for an entire community and the environment. Adding insult to injury, a recent Common Dreams article stated that "the Biden administration is siding with Norfolk Southern in a legal case that makes it easier for the profitable rail carrier to block pending and future lawsuits, including from victims of the ongoing disaster in East Palestine. Moreover, it could create a national precedent limiting where workers and consumers can bring cases against corporations."



Railcar wreckage in East Palestine, Ohio (courtesy Wikimedia Commons).

The East Palestine debacle has been followed by other serious derailments, including Springfield, Ohio (4 March 2023); Princeburg, Minnesota (30 March 2023); and Rockwood, Maine (15 April 2023).

If these recent developments have taught us anything, it's this—we should not expect the Democratic Party or any agent of the government to side with working people. The state will always support and protect capital at all costs, including overriding the will of the democratic majority of union workers. Real change doesn't happen by electing leaders, no matter how "progressive" they are, but by organizing and taking direct action ourselves.

It has also been made clear that essential workers, like those operating the railroads, hold tremendous power to the point where they can significantly disrupt sections of the economy, costing billions in daily losses. But this power can only be made possible if workers and communities continue to organize and fight as one united class, as opposed to separate crafts in separate industries. The Preamble of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) Constitution clearly stated the weakness of modern day trade unions over a century ago: "We find that the centering of the management of industries into fewer and fewer hands makes the trade unions unable to cope with the ever growing power of the employing class. The trade unions foster a state of affairs which allows one set of workers to be pitted against another set of workers in the same industry, thereby helping defeat one another in wage wars. Moreover, the trade unions aid the employing class to mislead the workers into the belief that the working class have interests in common with their employers. These conditions can be changed and the interest of the working class upheld only by an organization formed in such a way that all its members in any one industry, or in all industries if necessary, cease work whenever a strike or lockout is on in any department thereof, thus making an injury to one an injury to all."

I am cautiously optimistic that the labor movement is beginning to wake up to this realization, becoming aware that we had the power all along—it's in our hands. As the famous IWW leader Big Bill Haywood once said, "If the workers are organized, all they have to do is to put their hands in their pockets, and they have got the capitalist class whipped."

## Another Racist Murder, With Predictable Impunity

On 3 May 2023, in a crowded New York subway, we witnessed the senseless murder of yet another poor black person by a white vigilante masquerading as some public savior. Jordan Neely, 30, was in distress, clearly feeling the weight of several tragedies—the death of his mother (murdered by her boyfriend), homelessness, lack of work, and starvation. Typical of being black and poor, he had experienced steady run-ins with the police. Neely worked as a Michael Jackson impersonator, described as quite good at his trade, but who had fallen on hard times. As anyone would, he reached a breaking point. He boarded the car in the evening and, with nary an aggressive motion or verbal threat, yelled that, “He was tired of having nothing,” “Fed up and hungry,” and “I don’t mind going to jail and getting life in prison. I’m ready to die.” Then, a white 24-year-old former Marine jumped him from behind, put him in a chokehold, and—assisted by a car-full of co-conspirators—killed him. Such is our pitiless society that no one came to his aid. Even though authorities have deemed the act a “homicide,” at publication the person that committed it and his accomplices walk free. Protests quickly began to denounce what they called, without exaggeration, a “lynching.”



*Left to right:* Jordan Neely in 2009 about to see *Michael Jackson: A Troubled Genius*. Next, protestors decry the murder. Finally cops, defending so-called order, as they load a cuffed protester into a police van. *Sources:* “Subway Rider Choked Homeless Man to Death, Medical Examiner Rules,” *New York Times*, 4 May 2023; “Man dies after being put in a chokehold by another rider on New York City subway, officials say. The DA is investigating,” *CNN*, 4 May 2023. The pictures are from Getty Images.

## Comparing May Day: U.S. & Uruguay

by Halsey Hyer

La Plaza a los Mártires de Chicago en el Primero de Mayo / The Plaza of the Chicago Martyrs on May Day, founded in 1996. Today is its namesake day, 2023—50 years since the dictatorship in Uruguay began, 40 years since the dictatorship collapsed following a general strike that paralyzed the country, brought Uruguayans in defiance out of the shadows of isolation and terror.

The first thing I must remark on is the fact that there is a plaza at all.

Yes, we have plazas in the United States. I struggle to find my way in even describing a US plaza. I yearn to use a term other than *suburban strip mall* in a way that doesn’t sound derogatory or, fair or not, reduce it down to being something only meant for passive consumption, for capital flow. But I can’t.

The Plaza a los Mártires de Chicago stands in front of the Uruguayan Parliament building in Montevideo, dedicated to the Haymarket hanged, repressed by the state while demanding the eight-hour workday—need I to remind you? No monuments exist here—this space is intended and encouraged for public use. Over the years, it has become a major space for convening labor struggles. Not that this is the only plaza—you’ll notice while walking throughout Montevideo that there are plenty. These plazas serve to memorialize—*verb*.

The United States also has memorials—*noun*. We visit them, understand they are in the past, acknowledge and recite the history

we’ve been taught behind them, and move on. Consider the National Mall and Memorial Parks in Washington, DC. We visit to remember the almost 250,000 who marched on Washington and demanded civil rights with Martin Luther King Jr. We don’t demand there, not anymore.

But today, as the speaker demanded a *shortening* of the eight-hour workday, I darted through the crowd with my cameras admiring everyone, snapping photos while sometimes climbing on artificial structures, with my arms as high as I could reach in the air, and at other times with my elbows in the grass. Everyone moved out of the way for my camera’s view, straightened and held their banner a little higher, waved their flags with just a bit more vigor.

I had no pesos with me, though I saw a *pañuelo* (a “scarf”) for the equivalent of \$2.50, which I just loved so dearly—lavender, a venus symbol with a closed fist in its center, the word *juntas* (“together”) beneath. I couldn’t pay but explained in what I call *bueno suficiente* / good enough Spanish, with my partner’s help, that I was a feminist from the United States and I loved their *pañuelos*. I asked if I could trade one for a Polaroid photo of their group. A unanimous yes followed via simultaneous exclaim, everyone bounded together with arms scrunched on shoulders, one fist in the air, all of us cheering as I snapped the photo, and we exchanged something so precious to each of us.

This was a commemoration, yes, but a moment of struggle too. A recognition of what had passed and of how much remains to do.



**BREAKING NEWS: Jim Rogers—tased to death by the Pittsburgh police—has been partially vindicated. His family just won an \$8 million settlement in their wrongful death suit—the city’s largest payout for a civil rights violation. Rest easy, Jim.**