

Introductory remarks

(before screening *We Mean to Make Things Over: A History of May Day*)

Welcome. We're here [say where] to learn about International Workers Day, or May Day, so that we understand why a national union leader has called for a possible general strike on May first 2028. You'll get the history of May Day in the video, so I won't say a lot about that now. I'd just like to underscore a few points before we watch.

- 1) The May Day holiday is historically associated with a few positive ideas:
 - It honors workers
 - It's about winning the eight-hour workday
 - It's about collective action, including mass strikes, to achieve these goals
 - And especially, as appropriate for an international holiday, it's about immigrant worker rights and how they support the rights of all workers.
- 2) May Day is also connected with a few negative associations:
 - Employer resistance to worker needs and demands
 - Scapegoating attacks on immigrant workers to divide and conquer the working class on behalf of wealthy employers
 - The nation's first red scare, and consequent efforts by American authorities to make the holiday seem like a scary thing, especially during the Cold War.

The last part is especially relevant today. We are here under the shadow of a gathering fascism. When we say that, it's not about historical analogy with Germany or Italy in the 1930s. It's about clearly recognizing what's happening now: the assault on civil liberties that begins with marginalized groups, especially immigrants; the destruction of collective bargaining rights for federal workers; defunding and dismantling the helping agencies of government, while massively increasing the budget for the repressive apparatus; attacks on free speech in universities, on the justice system, on the media; putting the United States military into the streets of American cities against the will of the people and into other countries in disregard of international law and our own laws. And all of this will get worse if it doesn't get stopped.

May Day has something to say about all this. We are here today to talk, among other things, about the proposal by a United States labor leader to organize for a general strike on May Day 2028.

The first and only national general strike in US history was called for May first 1886 in an attempt to win the eight-hour workday. It was not very successful. We have only had fourteen **citywide** general strikes, and none since 1946. This is not a record inspiring confidence that we can pull off such an effort.

And yet, for the first time since then, a realistic idea of a general strike is in the air. You'll see the video briefly laying out the four things it takes to have a general strike: a generalized anger in the working class; the structure to organize it; leadership willing to call it; and a spark.

Let's note that Shawn Fain is the first national labor leader in more than a generation to issue a credible call to organize a general strike. I use that term, "organize", precisely. Anyone can call a general strike; many do. No general strike follows. The call to **organize** a general strike must occur under conditions that make it possible. Fain suggested that all unions should line up their contracts to expire together on May first 2028. That's really the first step in organizing a general strike; not, 'let's have one', but 'let's start with a **concrete action** that will help create **conditions** for it to happen'.

Fain issued his challenge a year before Trump was elected. The condition of the working class—especially the density of unions in the workforce—has been deteriorating for decades under Republicans and Democrats alike. Fain was essentially saying workers need to assert some direct control over their lives. We didn't get the civil and workplace rights that are crumbling now by being meek and asking for them, pretty please. We got them by organizing, by matching power for workers against the power of capitalists, our bosses. We've been losing those rights by forgetting how to act together in our own interests as the working class.

There's nothing like a dose of fascism to concentrate the mind of workers' organizations. Around the country unions have been passing resolutions to figure out how we line up our local contracts to expire on May first 2028, and explore using other tactics and events along the way to build the power of that moment.

I wouldn't say that this is an ideal situation. The other side holds most of the cards. But we can take heart from the fact that this was true in the 1930s and 40s when most of the citywide general strikes occurred. Before we watch the film I'll leave you with three more encouraging thoughts.

First, unions are more popular than in half a century: when we fight we win, and the public loves an underdog winner. We've had more strikes in the past several years than we've seen in decades. General strikes don't arise in a vacuum; they tend to occur as the crest of a strike wave.

Second, widespread anger in the working class—one of the preconditions for a general strike—is growing daily as Trump and his MAGA movement tear up our democracy.

And third, May Day—deliberately and falsely associated by employers with violent anarchism and then Communism for nearly a century and a half, and therefore shunned by organized labor—is now being embraced by a coalition of the labor movement and the left. For decades few in American labor would touch this holiday with a ten-foot pole. Now it's understood, once more, as a platform for united action for worker rights. On May Day 2025 hundreds of thousands of people demonstrated; in 2026 we hope it will be millions. But with any luck, and the right organizing, that might be just a stepping-stone toward even larger demonstrations of worker power on May first 2028.

The movie is thirty minutes. Let's watch it and have a good discussion afterward.