

**Stay  
Away  
Day**



20s-stytle May Day

'Ne'er cast a clout till May is out' runs the old country aphorism. Being born and brought up in London's East End, I had no idea that the saying referred to May blossom. Neither did my mother, and I remained cocooned in 'clouts' of flannellette vest and woolly pullover until the start of blazing June.

The Maytime link with country lore to mark the fertility of a new Spring had withered with the spread of industrialisation and the migration of labour from fields to cities. The smoke-blackened back-to-backs spawned by industrial capitalism were hardly the setting for apple-ducking, bearing morning-gathered branches and flowers in triumph to ribboned maypoles and the garlanding of May Queens. Instead of going 'a-maying', the people went to work. The great public holiday and celebration of

medieval England was relegated to folk memory.

It was the struggle of American socialists for the eight-hour working day that led to May Day becoming an international day of working-class solidarity and demonstration. The call emanated from the Second International in Paris, 1889, and since 1890 the first of May has grown to become the international day of labour, suppressed in some countries, given state support in others.

In Britain, the first May Day was marked by disunity: William Morris led the Socialist League on to the streets on May 1, while the wider and more pragmatic trade-union movement opted for the first Sunday, May 4, and rallied 300,000 to Hyde Park. Such was the size and colour of the demonstration that Engels was moved to remark he had heard 'the unmistakable voice of the

English proletariat!'.

May Day has witnessed many huge demonstrations in Britain from Glasgow to London, none more emotional than in 1926 when a million miners were locked out by employers demanding longer hours and shorter pay. Yet, despite official blessing in 1978 by the Labour government, who made it a public holiday, it is not identified in our cultural life as a day of celebration.

It is no longer necessary for socialists to whitewash the optimistic slogan 'all out on May Day' - for all Britain will stop work. Well, most of us: the sound of workers' feet will be heard by shop assistants as millions mill around M&S, tramp through Tesco's and descend on DIY hypermarkets to demonstrate their power by the mass purchase of consumer goods. •

*John Gorman*