May Day, International Workers' Day, commemorates the historic struggle of working people throughout the world. The holiday began in the 1880s, linked to the battle for the eight-hour day and the Haymarket Affair, in which eight anarchists were framed and sentenced to death in connection to uprisings against the repression of active strikers.

An international campaign resulted in two of the death sentences being commuted to life, but worldwide protest did not stop the US State. Of the remaining five, one (Louis Lingg) cheated the executioner and killed himself on the eve of the execution. The remaining four (Albert Parsons, August Spies, George Engel and Adolph Fischer) were hanged on November 11th 1887. They are known in Labour history as the Haymarket Martyrs. Between 150,000 and 500,000 lined the route taken by the funeral cortège and between 10,000 to 25,000 were estimated to have watched the burial. In 1889, the American delegation attending the International Workers congress in Paris proposed that May 1st be adopted as a workers’ holiday. This was to commemorate working class struggle and the “Martyrdom of the Chicago Eight”. Since then Mayday has became a day for international solidarity. Even less known is Australia’s connection to the day:

The happy idea of using a proletarian holiday celebration as a means to attain the eight-hour day was first born in Australia. The workers there decided in 1856 to organize a day of complete stoppage together with meetings and entertainment as a demonstration in favor of the eight-hour day. The day of this celebration was to be April 21. At first, the Australian workers intended this only for the year 1856. But this first celebration had such a strong effect on the proletarian masses of Australia, enlivening them and leading to new agitation, that it was decided to repeat the celebration every year;

In fact, what could give the workers greater courage and faith in their own strength than a mass work stoppage which they had decided themselves? What could give more courage to the eternal slaves of the factories and the workshops than the mustering of their own troops? Thus, the idea of a proletarian celebration was quickly accepted and, from Australia, began to spread to other countries until finally it had conquered the whole proletarian world.

The first to follow the example of the Australian workers were the Americans. In 1886 they decided that May 1 should be the day of universal work stoppage. On this day 200,000 of them left their work and demanded the eight-hour day. Later, police and legal harassment prevented the workers for many years from repeating this demonstration. However in 1888 they renewed their decision and decided that the next celebration would be May 1, 1890.

– Rosa Luxembourg 1894 ‘What are the Origins of May Day?’

On the 1st May 1886, Australia's first formally anarchist organisation was formed. From 1887 to 1889 the 1st of May was initiated and celebrated in Australia by anarchists associated with the Melbourne Anarchist Federation. In 1890 May Day celebrations were held in the office of Dr. Maloney MP in Melbourne. Chummy Fleming, a well known Melbourne anarchist, attended these celebrations. Demonstrations and celebrations were held in Ipswich and Barcaldine on the 1st May 1891 during the Shearers Strike, over 1,000 men took part in the Barcaldine march, 600 mounted on horseback. Melbourne held its first public May Day celebration on the 1st of May 1892. The celebration on the Yarra Bank was proceeded by a march which began at the Burke and Wills monument. The meeting at the Yarra Bank was chaired by the principal organiser of the March, the anarchist Chummy Fleming. May Day was celebrated in Australia from 1892 to 1899. It was not celebrated in Melbourne and the rest of Australia from 1900 to 1927. When May Day celebrations were recommenced in 1928, Chummy Fleming the Melbourne anarchist, although not part of the official organising committee led the May Day March in Melbourne until his death in the mid 1950's.

– Dr Joe Toscano (Anarchist Media Institute)

May Day, the festival for worldwide working class solidarity, is a product of the struggle of working people using direct action and solidarity to change the world. May Day is more than a monument, it is more than the past, it is a time for all rebels and workers to reflect on the struggle, to place ourselves in the living history of the movement for lives worth living, lives of dignity. It is a time to remember past struggles and demonstrate our hope for a better future. A day to remember that An Injury to One is An Injury to All.
“Never be deceived that the rich will allow you to vote away their wealth [and privilege].”

— Lucy Parsons, anarcho-syndicalist, founding member of the Industrial Workers of the World and widow to Haymarket martyr Albert Parsons

Ritually, we’re allowed to vote in a new State manager, but ultimately decision making power, resources, the media and the things we need to survive are controlled by a tiny elite and their corporate empires that are private, unaccountable and beyond any meaningful level of popular control. We are a business run society – our dignity and humanity come second to the overwhelming and overriding need for profit for investors. For example, it’s no accident that within one hour of assuming office, Julia Gillard killed Rudd’s attempt to force some of the most powerful multinational corporations in Australia to pay their fair share of tax and publically capitulated to that small section of society that owns the means of production, distribution, exchange and communication. What occurred publicly demonstrated that real power lies in the Boardrooms of unaccountable national and transnational corporations. If these corporations are willing to use their power to unseat a Prime Minister who wanted to introduce a piddling resources super profit tax in a country where most corporations legally minimise their taxes because of Australia’s corporate friendly taxation laws, what hope is there for any real democratic process?

Political rights and social gains do not exist because they have been legally set down on a piece of paper, but only when they have become the ingrown habit of a people, and when attempt to impair them will meet with the resistance of the populace. All political rights and liberties which people enjoy today, they do not owe to the good will of their governments, but to their own strength: Our rights were won and have to be maintained through struggle. Political rights are forced upon Parliament from without, and even their enactment into law has for a long time been no guarantee of their security. It’s a mistake to believe that society is based on rational arguments in the first place – our society is not a debating chamber, but a power struggle between different groups with competing interests. Governments, which serve privilege and power, have always employed every means to prevent the attainment of rights or render them illusory. Great mass movements and revolts have been necessary to wrest them from the ruling classes, who would never have consented to them voluntarily. The whole history of the last three hundred years is proof of that. What is important is not that governments have decided to concede certain rights to the people, but the reasons why they had to do this.

Whether we have parliamentary democracy or dictatorship, the seemingly insurmountable problems facing the planet and its peoples will not be solved by a few at the top issuing decrees, manipulating public opinion or pursuing their own agendas. Many of the roots of the social ills we see all around us today are the direct result of our deliberate disempowerment and exclusion from decision making processes. Political alienation and the domination of a ruling minority over the majority has been brought about by the development of bodies such as the State which are separate from and ‘above’ the general population. As long as administration is thought of as the specific function of a separate, centralised, independent apparatus, bureaucracy and class division will be inseparable from it. It is only through establishing real (direct) democracy that we have any hope of retrieving this precarious situation. The privileged and powerful have a passionate hatred for real democracy. We – the common people – have to be kept from interfering with the entire commercial, industrial and financial system!). We’re allowed to be spectators but not participants, because if we were we understandably might threaten their privileges and authority!

A truly participatory and democratic society - what is sometimes called Direct-Democracy - entails the creation of organisational forms based from below by the people themselves. In the history of struggle by those from below this has entailed experiments with structures based on self-management - that is the use of mandated, binding and rotatable delegates always accountable to the base. This may, for example, take the form of a Federation of Workers’ & Community Councils (mass assemblies) and the creation of a Central Assembly of Councils and of a Council Administration - the key factor being that such organisational forms do not constitute a delegation of popular power (ie: Political Parties - radical or otherwise - Governments/States etc) but are, on the contrary, an instrument of that power. Direct democracy requires that all economic and social structures of society be based on freely federated local groups and regions that are real, organic social units; it means that new relations have to be developed around life and work, with each other, in the workplace and in the community. It is only in such units that the participation of individuals can become total and in full knowledge of the relevant facts, that people can know and feel that their involvement is meaningful and that the real life of the community is being determined by its own members and not by some external agency, acting ‘on behalf of’ the community. This ideal of a libertarian, communitarian society built from below has surfaced throughout history, with some of the more recent examples having been achieved in the Paris Commune (1871), Kronstadt (1917-1921), Ukraine (Makhnovists 1920-22), Hungary (1956), on a large scale during the Spanish social revolution (1936-39), the struggle for workers control in Argentina (2005 onwards) as well as the Zapatista struggle for dignity in Chiapas (1994-Present).

Such eruptions in history are only possible through the horizontal self-organisation of the popular classes, through radically democratic forms of social organisation which maximise popular self-activity, direct action (effective acts from below such as decision making through assemblies, electing strike committees from the rank and file, lock-outs, occupations, economic blockades, community organising, education, boycotts, sabotage etc), self-confidence and self-management, thus preventing the emergence of external powers and unaccountable representatives. This is what we call the primacy of struggle - we are interested in class conflict not recruiting as many people as possible or creating self-serving organisations. Instead it is important to organise on a permanent basis within and across workplaces and the community to promote and agitate for libertarian (bottom up) forms of organising, as well as our principles/methods of solidarity, direct action and self-organisation. In uniting means and ends in this way we can improve conditions, begin to share ideas around dismantling current systems of hierarchy and domination (capitalist social relations, patriarchy, racism, privilege etc) and prefigure the alternative social relations, worker/community networks of struggle, organisations, civic life – and ultimately the counter-culture and counter-power necessary for the building of a better society. This is known as 'dual power’ – Building the foundations for the new world in the shell of the old.

This living, revolutionary (anti-)political tendency has at times been embodied in the terms ‘anarchism’ and ‘anarcho-syndicalism’, and forms the noble cause which we invite you to join here and now.