For over a century, millions of workers with hopes and aims like ours have taken to the streets in protest on May 1st: May Day.

The history of May Day is an inspiring story of the independent assertion of worker power.

As well as the necessity of well-directed political action,

Labour solidarity

It is a powerful reminder that we have to be active in the streets as well as at the ballot.

We are all part of this historical struggle;

It is our history, and our future.
The work we do defines how we live, and how we fit into society.

Workers have always had to fight to win better wages and conditions. Since the late 19th century, workers all over the world have engaged in direct action,

In the words of historian Eric Hobsbawm, "by that most fundamental assertion of working class power: the abstention from work."

This is the story of how workers in Canada have used tactics on May 1st, May Day to celebrate our work and to struggle to improve it.
ONE BRIGHT SPOT IN THE 1970'S WAS THE CONTINUING PROGRESS OF PUBLIC SECTOR ORGANIZING. IN QUEBEC, THE FEDERATION OF TEACHERS THREW ITSELF INTO ORGANIZING FOR THE MAY DAY CRISIS, COMING TOGETHER TO FIGURE OUT HOW TO GET YOUTH INVOLVED.

THEY DEVELOPED A CURRICULUM TO BRING WORKING CLASS POLITICS INTO THE CLASSROOM.

UPON HEARING OF THE TEACHERS' EFFORTS, THE MONTREAL PAPER, LE DEVER, CALLED THE CURRICULUM "SUBVERSIVE" BUT THE CONTROVERSY SPARKED INTEREST ELSEWHERE LEADING TO THE DISTRIBUTION OF CLOSE TO 100,000 COPIES.

TEACHERS PREPARED STUDENTS FOR MAY DAY THAT YEAR. STUDENTS MADE CARDS TO HAND OUT TO STRIKING WORKERS. THEY ALSO LEARNED AND SANG THE SONG, "CASEY JONES, THE UNION SCAB."
By the 1970s, the post-war boom had ended, and the bosses tried to roll back the gains workers had made. Attacks on wages, welfare, employment insurance, and the right to organize and strike made this another difficult period for workers. Workers regrouped to fight back and May Day again became pivotal.

In Vancouver, over 30 groups met to plan for the 1971 May Day celebration.

While multiple visions of social change existed, a strong voice emerged calling for greater participation of women.

Women workers demanded their issues be addressed.

When Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau announced that he would open the whale tank at Stanley Park and later host a $50 a plate dinner for his supporters on May 1st...

...he became the perfect target for a May Day protest, uniting many dissatisfied workers.
Originally, May Day protests and parades were intended as a single day of solidarity. But they captured the attention of workers in North America and then around the world.

This meant the definition of May Day was always changing. It was fluid.

It was struggled for, and struggled over.

After a long winter...

MAY DAY HAS LONG BEEN CELEBRATED AS AN ANNOUNCEMENT OF REBIRTH.

SPRING RITUALS, SUCH AS THE MAY POLE, MAY BE TRACED TO ANTIQUITY.
FOR WORKERS,

THEMES OF RENEWAL AND CHANGE SHAPED EARLY UNDERSTANDINGS OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WORK AND MAY DAY.

IN MANY COUNTRIES, INCLUDING CANADA, MAY 1ST BECAME THE DAY FOR RENEWING CONTRACTS AND NEGOTIATING WAGES.
In 1872, Canadian workers in larger cities demanded a shorter workday. Instead of a 10 or 12 hour day, they wanted a 9 hour day.

By May 1872, workers formed the Canadian Labor Protective and Mutual Improvement Association. That same month, the 9 hour pioneers in Hamilton, 1500 strong, marched through the city streets in solidarity. The 9 hour movement pressured the Canadian government to pass the Federal Trades Union Act, making unions legal.

9 Hour Day

The strength of the 9 hour pioneers inspired workers across the country, and internationally, to continue the fight for even shorter workdays.