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# May Day 1919: A Challenge and a Greeting.

by Rose Pastor Stokes

Published in *International Labor Day — 1919: Program for Your May 1st Meeting*. (Chicago, IL: Department of Organization and Propaganda, Socialist Party of United States, 1919), pp. 4-6.

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*Before her marriage to J.G. Phelps Stokes, Rose Pastor Stokes was a sweatshop slave, working away her life in the cigarmaking trade in Cleveland, Ohio. For remarks made in a speech while lecturing in Missouri, she was indicted and eventually sentenced by Judge Van Valkenburg to ten years imprisonment in the penitentiary at Jefferson City, Missouri. She was also convinced under the so-called “spy act,” under which no spy was ever tried.*



May Day — the day of Labor’s International — and never before a May Day so thrillingly significant! Where once we hoped, today we realize; where once we yearned, today we fulfill; where once we only thought, today we think and act! Not all of us, everywhere, true; but for millions upon millions of us, the world’s workers, the day of liberation has dawned.

For us, here, how sweet-scented is this Day with the air of approaching freedom! From far lands in the old world is borne to us the new odor of the flowers of our long-awaited Springtime — the Springtime of Humanity. And for the gift of this fragrance, from blossoms nurtured in the blood of Europe’s revolutionary proletariat, we send them, in return, the electric current of our unshakable will — to be faithful and loyal to the true International.

From over the vast spaces we hear the voices of our comrades. Over the still-budding birth of Liberty; over the world-filling clash of class wills and class conflict; over the efforts of the world’s exploiters (hiding beneath armies of confused workers — “facing” the aroused, irresistible hosts of the proletariat); over the battle of the losing Black Guards against the winning Red Guards there comes to us, workers of America, a ringing call. In the accents of Shelley, in the meaning of Marx, millions upon millions of voices, mingling as one voice, cry to us:

“Rise, like lions after slumber,  
 in unvanquishable number,  
 Shake your chains to earth like dew,  
 Which in sleep had fall’n on you.  
 YE ARE MANY, THEY ARE FEW.”

And we — we stir, we make answer. Hear us, comrades. Catch the meaning of our message over the “wireless” of our world-encircling Class Consciousness.

Yes! We are many, they are few. Yet we have slept. Yet we have allowed them to rob us of the common earth and the fruit of our hands; to bleed us white for their strength; to break us in our youth that they might have youth in old age; to draw the frail energies of our children and shut the gates of industry in our men’s faces, for their profit. We, the many, who build all that is built, clothe all that are clothed, feed all that are fed, who carry and fetch, comfort and heal, educate and entertain, create and inform; we have suffered them, the few, to leave us ill-sheltered and naked, hungry and insecure, limited, sick, and uncomforted; untaught, unsatisfied, repressed, uninformed, while them we have surfeited with all things.

We, the many, have suffered them, the few, to insult and betray us — to send us forth with the Judas-kiss of their hypocritical patriotism to kill our comrades and be killed, that they, the betrayers, might gain a few more bloody pieces of imperialistic silver. We, the many, have permitted them, the few, to fatten us before the killing, for their gold’s sake, and then, for the sake of their gold, to starve us at the very doors of our own granaries.

Like sheep have they driven us over the separating stiles of creed, race, nationality. While they themselves welcome every faith and color and nation in an imperialistic alliance against us, we have ourselves been divided by them into Jew and Christian; Black and White and Yellow. Teuton, Slav, and Anglo-Saxon — Native and Alien.

To suit their designs, we have been lured by

a beautiful word made hateful with bourgeois hypocrisy; and turned deaf ears to the music of a phrase become sweet with the prophesy of proletarian power.

We have allowed the Church, State, Press, Bourse, to drug, suppress, confuse, and swindle us — to undermine the foundations of our uprearing class-solidarity, while diplomats and politicians have used us as pawns in their criminal game.

But even as “lions after slumber,” we in America too, are awakening. We too, are flinging our proletarian challenge to the teeth of our bourgeois sharks: You have fed upon our wives and children long enough! We shall take our common heritage, the land. We shall take the mills and the mines and the workshops; we shall take the roads and the wires and the ships. All that we have made and you have held, we shall take. We shall establish an order in which none shall starve who is a willing worker and none shall eat who can and will not work; where each shall have a voice and vote who has the will to serve, and where the deliberate idler alone shall be disfranchised. In which enforced idleness of men and industry will be as rare as now it is common; in which insecurity, the canker of your hellish civilization, will disappear from the social body forever.

We shall become masters of our own destiny as today we are victims of your greed. We shall control all things that they who create all things may profit thereby. We shall rear temples of Art, Science, Learning for ourselves and our children as to date we have done these things for you alone. No longer at us, the “ignorant” and “uncouth,” shall you fling the challenge of the culture with which we have labored to provide you.

We shall wipe our war and the cause of war. We shall wipe out the parasitism that must find more and ever more victims to feed upon in order to exist. This May Day, we, the many, aroused and alert, reaffirm our solidarity with our broth-

ers in revolutionary lands. You shall not use us to wage your predatory wars upon our own class. We solemnly vow, and give you warning, that never shall we become executioners of our own freedom, destroyers of our own hope, traitors to our own historic destiny, prison wardens of our own power!

Speak what sweet words you may, never shall you lure us with honeyed phrases; conjure up from your trick-bag of cunning diplomacy what scare you may, no racial, religious, or nationalistic bogey shall frighten us. We have done. The spell is broken. We know the secret of all your black magic.

Our seeing eyes are tuned to the most significant, the most stupendous fact in all history: THE WORKERS OF THE WORLD ARE STRUGGLING SUCCESSFULLY TO THROW THE PARASITES OFF THEIR BACKS. This fact (let the parasites squirm as they will) fills the whole horizon. This struggle we, the workers of America, stand ready to aid but never to hinder.

You, the few, have browbeaten us to your profit and our loss long enough. Your bullying must come to an end.

Soon we shall have done toiling and starving, fighting and dying for you. Our hands that have been busy in your service shall become busy in our own. For you, we shall cease to labor. Against the power that resides in our unitedly idle hands you cannot prevail. To our general order "Tools down!" you may oppose the cry "To arms!" It will avail you nothing. Our forces are gathering. "We are many, ye are few!"

Yes, soon we shall have done toiling and starving, fighting and dying for you. Against your industrial chaos we shall oppose our industrial order; against your social rottenness we shall oppose our social sanity; against your war-breeding imperialism we shall oppose the fraternal interdependence of our Socialist Republics; against your Dictatorship of the Bourgeoisie we shall oppose our Dictatorship of the Proletariat.

This, despoilers of the People, is our May Day challenge to you!

Hear us, comrades of the new International! Catch the import of our challenge to our common enemy over the "wireless" of our world-encircling Class Consciousness, and read therein our May Day greeting to you.

*Edited by Tim Davenport.*

*Photo of Rose Pastor Stokes published in The New York World, 1909.*

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