

The Co-option of Labour Day Parade during the Derg Regime, 1975-1991

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Abstract

The declaration of May First or May Day as the holiday of the working people of the world or an International Workers' Day on 14 July 1889 was one of the major achievements of the Second International. It marked the commemoration of the Haymarket workers demonstrations for eight hours work in Chicago on 1 May 1886. Thereafter, May Day has been celebrated with colorful parade and has been serving as a platform for workers to make their voices heard. Though May Day had begun to be celebrated at the world stage since 1889, the Ethiopian workers and their organization began to observe it in 1975 nearly 86 years later. It was the military regime that declared May Day to be celebrated as one of the national holidays in the country on 10 January 1975. This paper therefore attempts to investigate how Labour Day parade has been celebrated in Ethiopia during the military regime. Since this is a qualitative study, data for the study was collected through document analysis and in-depth interviews. The collected data were analyzed thematically. The findings show that the May Day parade was fully co-opted by the military regime to indoctrinate its ideology and disseminate its propaganda to the public in general and workers in particular. Thus, the very foundational objective of May Day has been co-opted by the military regime.

Keywords: May Day, Communist Manifesto, Internationalism, *Derg*, Proletariat

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1. Introduction

Proletarian internationalism has been considered as a fundamental concept of socialism and communism since the days of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, even though the joining of the two words, proletariat and international, as proletarian internationalism was started after the First World War (WWI)¹. The concept of proletarian internationalism was, however, first reflected in *The Communist Manifesto*, an important document that announced the tenets of communism in 1848. In the concluding remark of the document, "Working men of all Countries, Unite!", Marx and Engels sought to create awareness among the workers of the world regarding the importance of unity to defeat their oppressors, the bourgeoisie. They argued that the victory of proletarians over their oppressors at the national level was not enough so long as proletarians across the world were still under oppression. Thus, they further stressed that the international aggressive expansion of capitalism forced the workers of the world to unite and confront this international challenge. They also noted that the interest of workers could be better served through cooperation with the international proletariat, not with the national bourgeoisie.²

The concept of proletariat internationalism emanated from the Marxist analysis of capitalism. Marxists believed that cooperation among the working class of the world should be seen as a precondition to fight against capitalism. They also encouraged the proletariat across the world to strengthen their solidarity and defend themselves from the merciless exploitation of the bourgeoisie. Marcel van der Linden defined proletarian internationalism as "...the collective actions of a group of workers in one country who set aside their short-term interests as a national group on behalf of a group of workers in another country, in order to promote their long-term interests as members of a trans-national class."³

Even though the working class struggle in Western Europe had sought international solidarity since the early 19th century, it was not able to establish an agency that would protect the proletariat across the world from the exploitation of the bourgeoisie until 1864. Nevertheless, the working class struggle to establish an international agency was intensified with the out break of the 1848 revolution across Europe. As a result, several organizations with multinational membership were created in Belgium and England and began to finance the

¹Marcel van der Linden, *Workers of the World: Essays toward a Global Labour History* (Leiden; Boston: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2008), p. 259.

²Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, Authorized English Translation, edited and annotated by Frederick Engels (New York: International Publishers, 2007), p. 44.

³Linden, p. 259.

working class movement in Europe.¹ It was from this movement that the International Working Men's Association (IWMA), commonly called the First International, was born in London on 28 September 1864. It aimed at coordinating the working class struggle against their oppressors, the bourgeoisie, across the world. Nevertheless, the First International began to decline after the fall of the Paris Commune in 1872 and eventually ceased to exist in 1876. The preoccupation of national trade unions on their internal matters was believed to have been one of the factors for the decline of the First International.² Despite its failure, the First International contributed a lot to the global unification of the class struggle of the working class of the world against their common enemy, capitalism.

After the demise of the First International, the proletariats of the world continued their struggle to consolidate their solidarity. The working class struggle, augmented by the newly emerging socialist cooperation, eventually led to the creation of the Second International in Paris on 14 July 1889. It was also called Socialist International as it was initiated by socialist and labour parties across Europe. As compared to the First International, the Second International was a broad organization that managed to encompass a number of working class movements across the world. It was also more decentralized than its precursor.³

The declaration of May First or May Day as the holiday of the working people of the world or an international workers' day on 14 July 1889 was one of the major achievements of the Second International. It was an event that aroused the expectancy of the working people throughout the world. The other major issue that the Congress of the Second International decided and officially recognized was the 8 hour working day which was the rallying cause of May Day.⁴ It was Samuel Gompers, President of the America Federation of Labour (AFL), who suggested to the participants of the Second International to transform May Day, which was already appropriated as a rallying day for the 8 hour working day among the American working class since 1886, into an international labour day to be celebrated by all workers across the world.⁵ Thus, May Day was not a socialist invention; rather it was introduced as a result of the long and arduous struggle of the American working class for the 8 hour working day.⁶

Though May Day arose from the 8 hour working day movement, it eventually became a day of solidarity, struggle and unity of the international proletariat. It is a day in which the international proletariat and the world's oppressed peoples analyze and recall their past struggles and sacrifices. It is also a day in which the workers assess the stage their struggle has reached and map out their next strategies and tactics both at the national and international levels. The slogans were also transformed from demanding for shorter work days to economic equality, democracy, individual right, green environment and a more humane world.⁷

Even though Ethiopia had been a member of the International Labour Organization (ILO) since 1923 and established the Confederation of Ethiopian Labour Unions (CELU) in 1963, it had never celebrated May Day before 1975. Since some of the Ethiopian rulers were shareholders in some of the biggest companies in the country, they often preferred to support the agenda of the employers than those of the workers. Moreover, CELU had never demanded the government to make May Day one of the national holidays. It had merely attempted to observe the day by arranging for its General Congress to be held on May first. In general, one can argue that neither the workers nor the imperial regime recognized the importance of the day before 1975.⁸

Though May Day had begun to be celebrated at the world stage since 1886, the Ethiopian workers and their organization began to observe it nearly 89 years later in 1975. It was the *Därg* regime that declared May Day to be celebrated as one of the national holidays in the country on 10 January 1975.⁹ Though the celebration of May Day had never been demanded by the workers until it was announced by the government, Kiflu Tadesse noted that the issue was raised in the *Voice of Labour* a few days before the *Därg* announced it. He further asserted that it was from that paper that the *Därg* took the idea and declared it officially.¹⁰ Nevertheless, since the paper that contained issues concerning May Day was barred from being published by the social committee of the *Därg*, it is very difficult to verify that the idea was initiated by CELU.

On the other hand, the *Därg* argued that ever since Ethiopia adopted socialism as a political and socio-economic system, it became one of the socialist countries in the world. Thus, it further argued that since many

¹*Ibid.*, p. 268.

²Linden, p. 272; Robert Bozinoviski, "The Communist Party of Australia and Proletarian Internationalism, 1928-1945," PhD Dissertation, Victoria University: Faculty of Arts, Education and Human Development, 2008, p. 24.

³Linden, pp. 273-274; Bozinoviski, pp. 23-24.

⁴William Z. Foster, *History of the Three Internationals* (New York: International Publishers, 1955), p. 199.

⁵David Goldway, "Neglected Page of History: The Story of May Day: A Talk Sponsored by the Friends of the Wellfleet Public Library, Wellfleet, Massachusetts, May, 1989," *Science & Society*, Vol. 69, No. 2, April, 2005, p. 223, Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40404819>.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 220.

⁷Goldway, p. 224.

⁸Informants: Bāyānā Solomon, Gābrā Selasē Gābrā Maryam, Abāra Abābā, Fesseha Şeyon Tākē.

⁹*Addis Zāmān*, *Ṭer* 3, 1967 EC (11 January, 1975).

¹⁰Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation: The History of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party, Part I, From the Early Beginnings to 1975* (Washington DC: Independent Publishers, 1993), pp. 220-221.

socialist countries celebrated May Day as one of the manifestations of their grand principle, proletarian internationalism, it was also a must for Ethiopia to celebrate May Day and join the camp.¹ It is, thus, feasible to argue that the celebration of May Day was initiated by the *Därg* and not by the workers themselves. It reached to this decision apparently to get the support of the Ethiopian workers and improve its relation with the national confederation, as well as to strengthen its relations with the socialist countries. In addition, by celebrating May Day, the *Därg* tried to prove to those countries that Ethiopia was building socialism and aspiring towards communism.

Regardless of the intention of the *Därg* behind the celebration of May Day, CELU welcomed it and expressed its readiness to celebrate the day with great zeal and in a progressive socialist spirit. In its message to the PMAC, CELU noted that: "...የ ጊዜያዊ ወታደራዊ መንግስት ጥር 2 ቀን 1967 ዓ.ም በሰጠው መግለጫ አካል ግንቦት 1 ቀን ዓለም አቀፍ የሰራተኞች ቀን በኢትዮጵያ ብሔራዊ በዓል ሆኖ እንዲከበር መወሰኑን የኢትዮጵያ ሠራተኞች አንድነት ማህበር በመሉል ልብ ይደግፋል።"² A number of basic trade unions also expressed their gratitude to the PMAC regarding the celebration of May Day. The Ethiopian Airlines Workers' Union, for instance, welcomed the decision of PMAC to designate May Day as national holiday on 10 January 1975. In a congratulatory message to the PMAC, the EAL workers' union expressed its support of the government's decision on the celebration of May Day.³

The celebration of May Day for the first time in the history of Ethiopia was organized by several stakeholders, including the Ministry of Social and Labour Affairs, Ministry of National Resources, Confederation of Ethiopian Labour Unions and Addis Ababa Municipality. It was started on 30 April 1975 in the afternoon with musical shows presented by military bands at major squares across Addis Ababa. Among others, the Ground Force Orchestra, the Imperial Body Guard Orchestra, the Police Orchestra and the Municipality Orchestra participated in the show. On 1 May 1975, a number of workers from trade unions in and around Addis Ababa marched to the Revolution Square from four directions. A number of government officials, ministers, military officers, ambassadors and other dignitaries including the chairman of the PMAC and the vice-chairmen attended the celebration as guests of honor.⁴

On the occasion, the chairman of the *Därg*, Brigadier General Täfäri Bānti, congratulated the workers and praised them for the indispensable role they played during the revolution. Moreover, he encouraged the workers to value the principles of socialism and defend the revolution from both its internal and external enemies. The first vice president of CELU also made a speech on the event. In his speech, Alām Abdi appreciated the political decisions of the *Därg* to bring all the resources and means of productions under the control of the general public. He also expressed succinctly that the Ethiopian workers were ready to struggle against the remnants of feudalism and imperialism and work for the development of socialism. In addition, he hailed May Day as the birthday of all workers and called on them to stop celebrating the birthday of Emperor Haile Selassie I and begin celebrating their own birthday.⁵

Even though the leaders of CELU were arrested and a serious division was created between the vice president, Alām Abdi, and his supporters who were backed by the *Därg* on the one hand and the leaders of some basic trade unions in and around Addis Ababa who were trying to establish a provisional leadership for the confederation on the other, thousands of workers participated in the May Day celebration. The *Därg* was able to bring the two conflicting groups together and celebrate the day colorfully. The workers who came with their industrial products added color to the occasion.⁶ Thousands of workers and other sections of the popular masses marched to the Revolution Square shouting slogans and hoisting up placards reading: "Down with Alām Abdi!" "CELU shall be independent!" "Provisional Peoples' Government now!" and "Democratic Rights must be respected!"⁷ True, they also shouted or hoisted on their placards anti-feudal and anti-imperialist as well as pro-socialist slogans.⁸ Despite the various anti government slogans shouted and hoisted on placards, however, the celebration was concluded peacefully.

¹Addis Zāmān, *ፒ*er 3, 1967 EC (11 January, 1975); Ethiopian Herald, 11 January 1975 (*ፒ*er 3, 1967 EC).

²"...CELU supports wholeheartedly the decision that the PMAC made on 10 January 1975 to celebrate May Day or May First as one of the national holidays of the country." See also *Addis Zāmān*, *ፒ*er 7, 1967 EC (15 January 1975).

³Ethiopian Herald, 12 January 1975 (*ፒ*er 4, 1967EC).

⁴Addis Zāmān, *Miyazeya* 22, 1967 EC (30 April 1975); *Māskārām* (A Marxist-Leninist Ideological Journal), Vol. 1, No. 4, *Miyazeya*, 1973 EC/1981, p. 18.

⁵Addis Zāmān, *Miyazeya* 23, 1967 EC/1May 1975.

⁶*Goh Bulletin*, Vol. 1, No. 7, *Sānē* 1967 EC (June 1975), p. 16.

⁷IES/CL, 2393/04/2/2.3, *Abyot*, Vol. 1 No. 4, April-May 1976, p. 22. Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation: ...Part I*, pp. 220-221.

⁸Addis Zāmān, *Miyazeya*, 23, 1967 EC (May 1, 1975).

Figure4.12 Industrial Workers from the Southern Sub City Administration of Addis Ababa Marching to the Revolution Square



Source: *Addis Zämän*, *Miyazyä* 23, 1967EC (1 May 1975); *Goh Bulletin*, Vol. 1, No. 7, *Sänè* 1967 EC (June, 1975), p. 16.

The 1976 and 1977 May Day celebrations were, however, marred by clashes that broke out between the *Därg* and POMOA on the one hand and EPRP and EWRU on the other. May Day was used as an important event by the two contending groups to flex their muscles by bringing as many of their supporters as possible to the rallies and making them disseminate their political manifestos by shouting slogans and hoisting them on their placards. Instead of being a day in which the workers themselves celebrate their victory, voice their grievances and demands, strengthen their solidarity and reaffirm their dedication to continue the struggle, the celebration of May Day during those years was used as an event in which workers were forced to echo the propaganda of the contradicting groups. In effect, it served as a battleground for the two contending groups, EPRP and *Meison*.¹

A week before the celebration of the 1976 May Day, most of the *Därg* officials went to several industries in and around Addis Ababa which were suspected as strongholds of the EPRP and held discussions with workers on how to celebrate the day peacefully. They urged workers to refrain from participating in any activities that would disrupt the peace and tranquility of May Day. They also advised them to come out with anti-CELU and anti-EPRP slogans.² In this regard, Fessehā Dästa, for instance, states in his memoirs that he held discussion with the workers of Berhanena Sälam Printing Press, Ethio-Djibouti Railway Company and the Ministry of Mining and Energy. He argued that the government used the discussions to gauge the attitude of workers before the celebration and set corrective measures to control the problems which would be created on May Day. He further argued that despite the preparation of the government to hold a peaceful May Day celebration, EPRP members managed to reach Revolution Square and disrupted the celebration not only by shouting and hoisting on their placards anti-*Därg* slogans but also by firing guns³ Though the author tried to describe the situation lucidly, he belittled the killing and repressions of workers by the regime and unfairly attributed the whole problem to the EPRP.

Besides intimidating radical workers who raised questions during the discussions, the *Därg* planned to snatch anti-government placards from workers before they get out of their starting points. A large number of soldiers and police forces were deployed along the main roads that led to Revolution Square and snatched placards and apprehended workers who were suspected as EPRP members. Regardless of the security pressure, the workers showed their determination by condemning the regime. In one of its clandestine papers, the EPRP noted that: "...በ ማስ ፈረረ ያ ቸውና በ ማን ሻ ውም ማን ገ ድ ለ ባ ደሩ ፣ ወጣቱና ሌላው ጭቁን ህዝብ እንደ ማይ ማላ ስ ሲያ ውቁ ዕለቱን የ ወታደርና የ ጦር ማሳሪያ ትሪት ማሳያ አድርገውት ዋሉ።"⁴ Despite the security personnel's pressure, however, a number of workers reached

¹IES/CL, 2393/04/2/4.4, *Abyot*, Vol.5, No.4, May 1980, pp. 7-8; *Mäskäräm*, Vol. 1, No.4, *Miyazyä*,1973 EC/1981, p. 19; Andargachew Tiruneh, p. 211.

²IES/CL, 2393/04/2/2.3, *Abyot*, Vol. 1, No. 4, April-May, 1976, p. 23; IES/CL, 2393/04/2/2.4, *Abyot*, Vol. 1, No. 5, June-July, 1976, p.1.

³Fesseha Dsta, *Abyoyu ena Tezetayè* (Los Angeles; Addis Ababa: Tsehai Publisher, 2008), p. 184.

⁴"...When the intimidation of the *Därg* against workers failed, it brought the army and heavy machine guns and made May Day a military

Revolution Square shouting and hoisting anti *Därg* slogans. They demanded the respect of democratic rights and raised other wide ranging issues.¹

...የ አዲስ አበባና የ አካባቢው ላባደር፣ ወጣትና ሌላው ህዝብ ይዟቸው ከወጣቸው መፈክሮች መካከል፡ ጊዜያዊ ህዝባዊ መንግስት ይቋቋም! ኢህአፓ የ ላባደሩ ፓርቲ ነው፤ ጭቁን ህዝብ በኤርትራ ላይ አይዘምትም! ባንዳ መሀራን ይወደሙ! በኢሰአማ ላይ የ መንግስት ተፅኖ ይቋቋም! የ ላባደሩ ዝቅተኛ ደሞዝ ይወሰን! በሰራተኛው ላይ የ ታወጀው የ ባርነት አዋጅ ይወገድ! የ ሚሊትሪ ደመቅ ብለው የ ሚታዩ እና በሩቁ የ ሚሰሙን በሩ።²

...Among the slogans that the workers, youths and other people of Addis Ababa and its surrounding shouted and hoisted on their placards, the ones conspicuously seen and loudly heard at a distance include: Let Provisional People's Government be established! EPRP is the vanguard party of the workers! The oppressed mass shall never campaign on Eritrea! Down with the comprador scholars! Stop government's intervention on CELU! Let the minimum wage be decided! Let the slavery law proclaimed on workers [Proclamation No. 64/1975] be dissolved!

Even though the May Day celebration took place in several provincial towns, it was only in Addis Ababa that the deadly clash between the demonstrators and government soldiers broke out. In all cities and towns across the country, the soldiers and police force attacked and arrested suspected opponents. In Addis Ababa, however, they shot and killed a number of demonstrators. The number of casualties was not clearly known as prisoners were also killed later. Andargachew Tiruneh, however, argued that around 20 people were killed during the demonstration. But, Babile Tola doubled the figure and argued that more than 40 people were killed during the 1976 May Day demonstration.³ In general, one can argue that whatever the number of casualties, the 1976 May Day marked the transformation of trade unions-state relation from a mere contradiction into serious animosity.

The 1977 May Day was celebrated after the labour movement of the country had come under strict state control. The *Därg* had already clipped EWRU, the labour wing of EPRP, during the comprehensive house to house search campaign conducted from 23 to 27 March 1977. A number of workers who were suspected as EPRP members were also exposed and apprehended in several industries. As a result, EPRP had already been losing its control on trade unions before the May Day celebration.⁴

In addition, the war of total annihilation waged on EPRP and EWRU by the *Därg* and *Mieson* was augmented with the creation of internal division among the leaders of the party, which forced EPRP to abandon conducting protest demonstrations during major celebrations. It was forced to carry out only small scale rallies at the *qäbällè* levels. Thus, EPRP and some members of the defunct EWRU agreed to carry out small scale rallies in several *qäbällès* of Addis Ababa on the eve of May Day. The responsibility of executing the rallies at each *qäbällè* was given to the Addis Ababa Youth League.⁵

The Youth League organized the protest demonstrations in each *qäbällè* on 29 April 1977 apparently to avoid similar casualties that had happened in previous year May Day celebration. By six o'clock on Friday evening, hundreds of youth and children went out for demonstration in more than 20 *qäbällès*. Even though EPRP had the information that the *Därg* had already obtained the plan of the demonstration, it could not disseminate the information to the demonstrators and stop the demonstration.⁶ Jacob Wiebel argued that the *Därg* obtained the information from a mid-level EPRP member who was apprehended at *qäbällè* level.⁷

Once the *Därg* received the information, it put the revolutionary defense squads and the soldiers on alert to respond to the demonstrators. Thus, as soon as the demonstrators reached around the *qäbällè* offices, the revolutionary defence squads supported by the soldiers in military jeeps opened fire on them. By doing so, they committed a horrifying massacre on young children and youths. Well over five hundred demonstrators were slain in less than two hours. A number of youths were also apprehended and later killed. The massacre continued the following day across the city. The families who lost their sons and daughters during the heinous massacre

show up." See also IES/CL, 1775/02/31, ላብ አደር, ሜይ ደይ እንዴት አለፈ?

¹Babile Tola, *To Kill a Generation: The Red Terror in Ethiopia* (Washington, DC: Free Ethiopia Press, 1989), p. 43; IES/CL, 2393/04/2/4.4, *Abyot*, Vol.5, No.4, May, 1980, pp. 7-8.

²IES/CL, 1775/02/31, ላብ አደር, ሜይ ደይ እንዴት አለፈ?

³Babile, p. 43; *Abyot*, Vol. I, No. 5, June-July, 1976, p. 3; *Abyot*, Vol. I, No. 4 April-May, 1976, It deals about May Day celebration in Addis Ababa.

⁴*Mäskäräm* (A Marxist-Leninist Ideology Journal), Vol. I, No. 4, 1973 EC/1981, p. 19.

⁵Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation:...Part II*, p. 316; Babile, pp. 141-142.

⁶Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation:...Part II*, pp. 316-317.

⁷Jacob Wiebel, "Revolutionary Terror Campaigns in Addis Ababa, 1976-1978," PhD Dissertation, University of Oxford: St. Cross College, 2014, p. 159.

were also forced to pay 250 Ethiopian dollars to take the corpses from Menilek II Hospital.¹

Even though workers were not active participants and their casualty was insignificant during the demonstration, the eve of the 1977 May Day celebration is still remembered as black eve of May Day in the history of the Ethiopian working class movement. It was the day when the highest carnage was committed even in the history of red terror in this country. Jacob Wiebel for instance argued that "...the massacres that erupted in Addis Ababa on the eve of May Day in 1977 marked the single most violent day in the history of the Ethiopian terror."² Bahru Zewde also succinctly put the horrifying carnage of the day as "...the carnage of May Day 1977 was the dress rehearsal for the massive killings that characterized the third phase of the government terror."³ Qonjit Berhan, one of the members of the Youth League, gave her eye witness account of the massacre of the eve of May Day as follows. The eve of the 1977 May Day was:

...በኢትዮጵያ ውስጥ ታይቶ የሚያወቅ የወጣት ዕልቂት የደረሰበት ዕለት!
ወላጆች ለልጆቻቸው ማደያ የተተኮሰውን ጥይት ዋጋ ከፍለው
የልጆቻቸውን አስከሬን ለመውሰድ እንኳን የተከለከሉበት ቀን! እናቶች
መውለዳቸውን የረገመባት ክፉ ጊዜ! ሰሚ የሌለው ጩኸት አዲስ አበባን
ያስጩ ቀበት ወቅት! አዲስ አበባ ከየካቲት 12 የግራዚያኒ ጭጭ በኋላ
ዳግም ትልቅ የለቅሶ ቤት የሆነችበት የጨማቅ ቀን! ከጣሊያን በማጡ
ሳይሆን ማህፀኗ በፈጠራቸው ፋሽስቶች ማቅ የለበሰችበት ቀን!⁴

...The day when unprecedented massacre of youths happened in Ethiopia! The day when parents were denied to take the corpse of their children even after paying for the bullet with which they were killed! A trying time that mothers cursed the day they gave birth! A time when Addis Ababa was anxious by a voice which had no one to hear it! The darkest day that Addis Ababa became a mourning house after the Fascist Italy massacre in February 19[1937]! A day that [Ethiopia] wore a black mourning clothing not because of the Fascists who came from Italy but due to those who grew from her womb!

Besides the total annihilation of EPRP by the regime, the heinous massacre on the eve of the 1977 May Day demoralized workers and apparently forced them to abandon anti-government demonstrations in subsequent May Day celebrations.

May Day celebrations from 1978 to 1991 were organized under the full control of the government. It had used May Day celebrations to mobilize supporters and broadcast its strength not only to the broad masses of the country but also to the international community. It had also used them to strengthen its solidarity with the working class and the rest of the Ethiopian people against its internal and external enemies. Primarily, the government had used May Day celebrations to condemn the Somali irredentists, the liberation fronts, opposition groups and all anti-revolutionary movements. The following slogans which were shouted by workers and hoisted on their placards during the May Day celebrations succinctly indicated that the regime had used the day to mobilize the workers and the broad masses of the country for the war against those groups. Among the major slogans which were shouted and hoisted on placards by the workers during the May Day celebrations were: "Revolutionary mother land or death!" "Everything to the War Front!" "The objective of the Red Star campaign is people-centered!" "Death to the CIA Mercenaries, EPLF and TPLF!" The proletariats are the forerunners to the call of the motherland!"⁵

Figure4.13 Revolutionary Mother Land or Death! Figure4.14 The Red Star Campaign has Popular Support!

Source: Ethiopian Herald, 28 April 1981
(Miyazya 20, 1973 EC)

Source: *Särtoadär, Miyazya* 21, 1974 EC
(29 April 1982)

¹Hiwet Teffera, *Tower in the Sky* (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 2012), p. 243; Andargachew Tiruneh, pp. 211-212; Babile, pp. 141-142; Qonjit Berhan, *Yalaräfu Näfesoç* (Addis Ababa: Far East Trading PLC, 2010), pp. 166-167.

²Wiebel, p. 157.

³Bahru Zewde, "The "Red Terror" in Ethiopia: Historical Context and Consequences," in *Society, state and History: Selected Essays* (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 2008), p. 439.

⁴Qonjit, pp.167-168.

⁵Ethiopian Herald, 28 April 1981 (*Miyazya* 20, 1973 EC); 2 May 1989 (*Miyazya* 24, 1981 EC); 3 May 1985 (*Miyazya* 25, 1977 EC); 2 May 1990 (*Miyazya* 24, 1982); *Särtoadär, Miyazya* 21, 1974 EC (29 April 1982).



Figure4.15 Everything to the War Front!

Source: Ethiopian Herald, 2 May 1989 (*Miyazya* 24, 1981 EC)

The second major issue that the government disseminated during the May Day celebrations was related with the establishment of COPWE, the organization of the Workers Party of Ethiopia (WPE) and the formation of the Peoples Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (PDRE). Thus, May Day celebrations were used to mobilize workers and other sections of the society to work for the formation of the party and the people’s government. In this regard, among the major slogans which were repeatedly used and loudly heard and conspicuously seen at a distance during the May Day celebrations were the following: “the mission of COPWE would succeed!” “We shall organize WPE!” “The workers would implement WPE's decisions!” “We would endeavor for the implementation of WPE's decisions!” “The objective of WPE is the proletariat’s objective! and “We shall establish PDRE!”¹

Figure4.16 The Mission of COPWE Would Succeed! Figure4.17 Proletariats would Implement WPE's Decisions!

Source: Ethiopian Herald, 4 May 1982
 (*Miyazya* 26, 1974 EC)

Source: Ethiopian Herald, 3 May 1985
 (*Miyazya* 25, 1977 E)



Figure4.18 We shall struggle to build Peoples' Democratic Ethiopia! Figure4.19 We shall build PDRE!

Source: *Särtoadär*, *Miyazya* 23, 1981EC.
 (1 May 1989)

Source: Ethiopian Herald, 2 May 1989.
 (*Miyazya* 24, 1981 EC)

Thirdly, the government had used May Day celebrations to indoctrinate the working class and the broad masses of the country with Marxism-Leninism and the principles of socialism. It had also used the day to consolidate the

¹Ethiopian Herald, 4 May 1982 (*Miyazya* 26, 1974 EC); 3 May 1985 (*Miyazya* 25, 1977 EC); 2 May 1990 (*Miyazya* 24, 1982 EC); 2 May 1989 (*Miyazya* 24, 1981 EC); 1 May 1987 (*Miyazya* 23, 1979 EC); *Särtoadär*, *Miyazya* 23, 1981EC (1 May 1989).

core principle of its foreign policy, proletarian internationalism.¹ True, all socialist countries adopted proletarian internationalism as a core principle and urged workers to organize and fight their exploiters. The proponents of this concept argued that the problem of workers in one country is similar with the problem of workers in the rest of the world. Thus, they further argued that the workers should fight their common enemy jointly, not independently.² As a socialist country, Ethiopia also joined the camp to strengthen its foreign relations with the other socialist countries across the world.

During the imperial period, Ethiopia's foreign policy was more inclined to the West than the East. Likewise, since its establishment, CELU had been influenced by ICFTU and other western trade unions. As a result, its foreign policy was inclined towards the West than the East.³ But, the government did not force it to shape its foreign relation only with western trade unions. Following the coming to power of the military regime and the adoption of socialism, however, Ethiopia's foreign relation totally shifted from the West to the East. Proletarian Internationalism became the focus of the regime's foreign policy. Likewise, the foreign relation of the Ethiopian working class shifted in line with the government's foreign policy. The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), American Federation of Labour-Congress of Industrial Organization (AFL-CIO) and African Labour Center were expelled out of the country. Instead, AETU was advised to strengthen its relations with the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) and other trade unions of socialist countries.⁴ Regarding the core principle of its foreign policy, AETU noted that:

...መ.ኢ.ሠ.ማ ከዚህ መርህ በመሰማ ሳት የውጭ ግንኙነት ፖሊሲውን ይቀይሳል፣
በመሆኑም የመላ ኢትዮጵያ ሠራተኞች ማህበር ከተራማጅና የሶሻሊስት ሐገሮች የሠራተኛ ማህበራት ጋር በወዝ አደራዊ ዓለም አቀፋዊነት መርህ ላይ የተመሰረተ ግንኙነት በመፍጠር በተለያዩ የዓለም ዓቀፍ ስብሰባዎች ላይ ተካፋይ በመሆን በሚያደርጋቸው አስተዋፅዖቶች የሶሻሊስቱን ካምፕ በማጠናከር ለኢምፔራሊስት ካምፕ ማዳከም ድጋፍ ሰጥቷል።⁵

...AETU would draft its foreign policy based on this principle [Proletarian Internationalism]. Thus, by creating relationship with the trade unions of progressive socialist countries on the basis of the principle of proletarian internationalism and by participating in several international meetings and contributing its part, AETU provided with an additional support to weakening the imperialist camp by strengthening the socialist camp.

The government had often used May Day celebrations to urge workers to strengthen their relations with the world proletariat. Thus, the workers had been forced to praise socialism, Marxism-Leninism and proletarian internationalism in the slogans they used to shout and hoist on their placards during May Day celebrations. Among others, the slogans which were shouted and hoisted on their placards during May Day demonstrations were the following: “the world would come under the control of the proletariat!” “Long live Proletarian Internationalism!” “Marxism-Leninism is our Guiding principle!” “Long live May Day!” “The working class's historical mission would succeed!”⁶

Figure4. 20 Let Proletarian Internationalism Flourish! Fig4.21 Marxism-Leninism is our Guiding Principle!

Source: *Addis Zāmān, Miyazya* 24, 1979 EC (2 May 1987)

Source: Ethiopian Herald, 1 May 1981 (23 *Miyazya* 1973 EC)

¹Mäskäräm, *A Marxist-Leninist Ideological Journal*, Vol. I, No. 4, 1973 EC, p. 3.

²Bozinovski, pp. 22-23.

³AETU, "AETU and International Trade Unions," unpublished (Amharic), Addis Ababa, *Sänè* 1974 EC/June 1982, p. 30.

⁴*Ibid.*, p.32..

⁵*Ibid.*, p.33.

⁶*Addis Zāmān, Miyazya* 24, 1979 EC (2 May 1987); Ethiopian Herald, 1 May 1981 (*Miyazya* 23, 1979 EC); 1 May 1981 (23 *Miyazya* 1973 EC); 4 May 1982 (*Miyazya* 26, 74 EC).

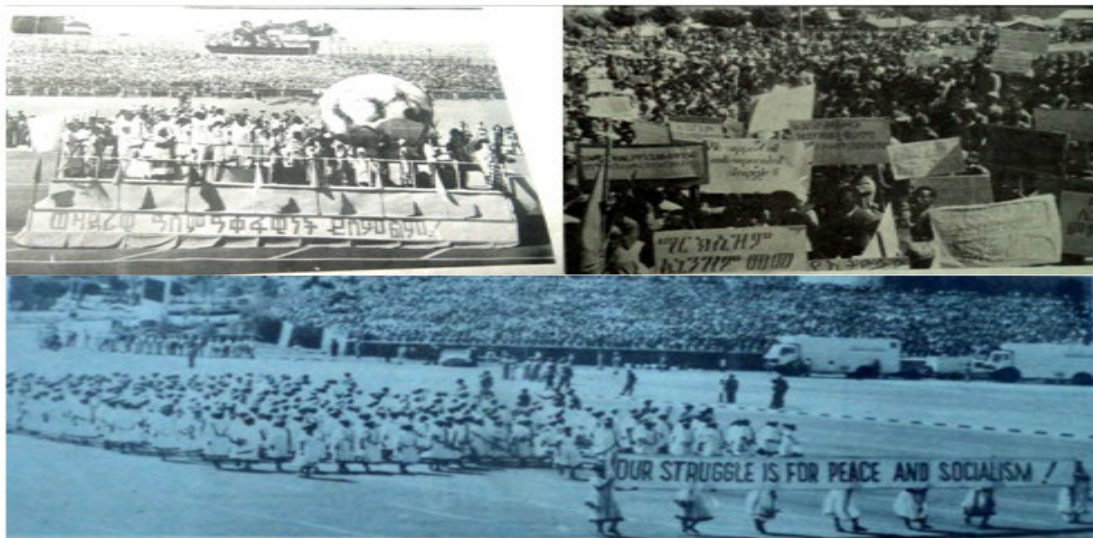


Figure4.22 Our Struggle is for Peace and Socialism!

Source: Ethiopian Herald, 1 May 1987 (*Miyazya* 23, 1979 EC)

In general, even though May Day was celebrated with massive street demonstrations in the presence of different guests of honor, including the leaders of the country, from 1975 to 1991, the workers had never used it to strengthen their solidarity, express their grievances, show their abilities and present their demands. It was rather used as a stage for opposition groups to flex their muscle by dividing the workers. For the first three years, it was virtually used as a battle ground for the warring groups, the EPRP and EWRU on the one hand and the *Därg* and *Mieson* on the other. After the *Därg* totally annihilated its opponents, May Day continued to serve merely as an important occasion in which the regime consolidated its support, disseminated its policies and indoctrinated the people of Ethiopia in general and the working class in particular with its ideology. Thus, one can argue that the May Day celebrations in Ethiopia failed to meet the very objective for which it was instituted.

Conclusion

The military regime decided May Day to be observed as one of the national holidays of the country on 10 January 1975. Since the regime adopted socialism as its political economic ideology, the decision was taken as a fundamental step to get the support of the Ethiopian workers. The Confederation of Ethiopian Labour Union (CELU) appreciated the decision of the military government and disseminated the news to sister trade unions across the world. Moreover, it invited sister trade unions to take part in the celebration of May Day that CELU observed for the first time in its history. Thus, the 1975 May Day was colorfully celebrated across the major cities of the country in general and Addis Ababa in particular. The Ethiopian workers marched carrying placards that reflect their corporate demands. They also exhibited their solidarity to the general public.

The 1976 and 1977 Labour Day parades were, however, tainted by the political ideologies of the military regime (*Derg*), the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP), the All Ethiopian Socialist Movement (AESM) and other interest groups. The parades were marred by insults and chaos that affected the marchers. More importantly, Labour Day parades were co-opted by the military regime from 1978-1991 and used to reflect its propaganda. They were used to monger war, indoctrinate socialism and instill the agendas of the Workers Party of Ethiopia (WPE) that was not in reality the party of the workers. Thus, the Labour Day parade was totally co-opted by the military regime.

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