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GREENLIGHT



## May Day, 2019

BY JEFF VONKAENEL / jeffv@newsreview.com

**Before the sun rises, cars are already on** the freeway heading down to the Bay Area. In those cars are drivers who are unable to afford a home in the city where they work. After putting in a full day of work, they will return to their homes, long after the sun has set and their kids have gone to bed.

May Day, International Workers' Day, commemorates a demonstration in 1886 that supported workers striking for an eight-hour work day. The simple goal was to be paid the same as the then-standard 10- to 12-hour day, but to work a more humane eight hours. In those days there was massive income inequality, a court system that consistently ruled against working people and a political system controlled by a small group of wealthy individuals and large corporations. There was a hard, and often violent, struggle of labor against capital.

But by the end of World War II, it seemed that those days were behind us. By the time of my birth in 1951, it was a different America. There was a growing middle class with opportunity for home ownership. It was a time when someone who worked hard and obeyed the rules could expect a secure life with a home, enough food, good schools for their kids and a reasonable work-life balance.

Between 1945 and 1952, thanks to the GI Bill, my father, who had been working as an hourly worker at a steel mill, became a doctor and a parent without incurring a cent of debt.

Between 1969 and 1972, I put myself through college without a scholarship, student loans or financial support from my parents. I even concluded my four years of college with a little money in the bank.

My children certainly did not have that experience.

In 1980, my wife and I bought our first home in Chico. We paid about the same amount that my son now pays for one year's rent for a much smaller place in Los Angeles.

Young people entering the workforce in 2019 do not have the same opportunities that their parents did. Unfortunately, they face a world that looks more like the world of the striking workers in 1886 than the world of their parents and grandparents.

Home ownership is often not a possibility. A college education is not always a good investment of time or money. And even starting a small business is a gamble with so much of our country's profits going to a small number of large corporations.

What does this all mean for May Day 2019?

Just as in 1886, young people can no longer depend upon their own efforts to secure a future. Working hard will not guarantee success.

What is needed, just as in 1886, is political action to change the rules of the game. And just as in 1886, it is the labor unions that are fighting this battle. It is the unions that are fighting to eliminate rich people's tax breaks, to increase the minimum wage, to change California's Proposition 13 limiting commercial property tax rates, to increase environmental protections and to raise the standard of living for the working class.

Like 1886, it is us vs. the one percent. Or, perhaps, it is now us against an even smaller group—the 1/10 of one percent. □

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Jeff vonKaenel is the president, CEO and majority owner of the News & Review.