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Workers of the World Unite:

Wrestling with the Life & Legacy of Karl Marx

The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg

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Yesterday was May 1, also known as “International Workers’ Day” or May Day, an annual celebration of the working classes that dates back more than 130 years to the late nineteenth century. Here in the U.S., it is quite telling that we celebrate Labor Day in September—a date idiosyncratic to our own country—instead of on May 1st, in solidarity with the international labour movement. It matters which stories we choose to tell—and when.

And if there is one figure most associated with International Workers’ Day it is the nineteenth-century German philosopher, political theorist, and socialist revolutionary Karl Marx (1818-1883). After all, *The Communist Manifesto*, his 1848 pamphlet, co-authored with Friedrich Engels, helped make famous the slogan, “Workers of the world, unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains!”

Marx’s hoped-for legacy is even more succinctly emblazoned on his tombstone, which distills his call to arms to five simple words: “Workers of all lands, unite.” Further down on his tombstone is another significant quote, this time from another nineteenth century philosopher, Ludwig Feuerbach: “The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways. The point however is to change it” (114-115).

Some of you may recall that last year our International Workers’ Day service focused on the work of the economist Thomas Piketty, who is brilliantly updating and

reimagining Marx's ideas for the twenty-first century (105). I highly recommend his work on global wealth inequality to anyone interested. *Capital and Ideology* is the sequel to his earlier book *Capital in the Twenty-first Century*.

And this year I have been planning for us to spend a few minutes exploring the life and legacy of Marx himself. Now that we have the perspective of looking back—well more than a century after his death in 1883—what are some of the good and the bad impacts of how his ideas have and haven't changed the world? What do we know of the human Marx behind the myths and the voluminous writings? We're still going to explore those questions, but first I feel like I have to name the elephant in the room regarding labor rights at the moment.

On this May Day, one story that labor rights activists hoped to be celebrating was the unionization of workers at an Amazon Warehouse in Alabama, as a cornerstone for a much more widespread effort; alas, that attempt was somewhat spectacularly unsuccessful. On this May Day, not only have “the workers of the world” not yet united, but only about half of the workers in this particular warehouse even voted ([The New York Times](#)). Nevertheless, this setback may provide valuable lessons for the future.

One of the reasons I am taking the time to bring this up is that, although Walmart is the single largest private sector employer in the United States, Amazon is right behind them as our country's second-largest private employer ([The Washington Post](#)). As some labor rights observers have invited us to consider, “Amazon, Google, Walmart and Target are this generation's Ford, General Motors and U.S. Steel” ([The New York Times](#)). So the struggle for a living wage and dignified working environment at Amazon and other related corporations really is worth our time and attention.

And we need to be honest that one of the main reasons this unionization effort failed is that the labor rights activists were fighting an uphill battle. To quote Erik Loomis, a history professor at the University of Rhode Island who studies the history of U.S. labor right movement:

Amazon pulled out the same playbook that employers have used since the 1980s: hire an expensive anti-union law firm, shower employees with anti-union literature, force them to sit through anti-union meetings and

bombard them with messages about union dues. This is all perfectly legal under a labor-law regime captured by corporations.

So what is needed is, in the words of Marx's tombstone, *not only to interpret the world, but to change it*. I'll limit myself to sharing three top ideas from labor rights activists if we are to get serious as a society about leveling the playing field for workers:

1. **Pass the PRO Act** ("Protecting the Right to Organize"), which would prevent employers from using the tactics such as the ones we just listed, strengthen various protections for workers seeking to support unionization, and increase penalties for employers who retaliate against unionizers. The PRO Act has passed the U.S. House of Representatives, but is currently one of many important pieces of legislation unlikely to pass in the Senate unless there is filibuster reform.
2. **Card check** is an alternative to holding a single high pressure vote such as the one that just happened at that Amazon Warehouse in Alabama. A card check would allow efforts to build over time, and create unionization at any point a majority of workers have signed cards.
3. **Sectorial bargaining** is an approach with a proven track record in many European countries such as Germany, France, and Norway. Instead of focusing on one company, a union "could bargain with all the major employers in an industry by getting, say, 10 to 20 percent of the industry's workers to sign cards. That would diminish the incentive of any one employer to fight a union campaign out of a fear of competitive disadvantage" (The New York Times Newsletter).

So on this Sunday closest to International Workers' Day, I offer this brief reflection on the state of the U.S. labor rights movement both to underscore the anti-union bias in our current system, and to outline how we might begin to commit more fully to a more equitable future.

Now let's turn to the broader picture: Marx's vision of the workers of the world uniting to co-create a more equitable world. As many of you know, I have been teaching an "Introduction to the World's Religions" survey course this past semester at Frederick Community, and when I reflect on the influence of Marx, there are many ways in which he helped launch a movement that in many ways functions as a religion.

Consider that:

For much of the second half of the twentieth century, nearly four out of every ten people on earth lived under governments that considered themselves Marxist.... In these countries Marx was almost a secular deity. His image was everywhere reverently displayed and his words were considered the ultimate source of truth and authority. (Singer 1)

And similar to the often violent battles over the interpretations of religious scriptures, “Political leaders and their opponents sought to interpret [Marx’s writings] in ways that suited their political leanings, and the fate of those who lost was similar to that of heretics” (*ibid*). In our own country, we could also point to the ways that McCarthyism, the Vietnam War, local and national elections and more were sold to the American public, in part, based on the threat of creeping Marxism (2).

I will say more shortly about wrestling with Marx’s complicated legacy, but first I want to us to spend a little time getting to know the man behind the myths—“The Quest for the Historical Marx,” if you will—that often gets lost in power struggles over interpreting his writings.

To that end, I invite you to come back with me a little more than two centuries, to 1818, when Karl Marx was born in Trier, a city in what is today the modern state of Germany. Both sides of his family were Jewish, but they were forced to convert to Lutheranism “at least nominally” because Marx’s father was a lawyer, and a few years before Marx was born the law was changed to prevent Jews from practicing law (2). Here you can see one of many pieces of Anti-Semitism that built up over many centuries to lay the groundwork for the Holocaust—but that it is a topic for another day.

To continue with our quick tour through Marx’s life, in 1835 at age 17, he enrolled at the University of Bonn with the intention to follow in his father’s footsteps and become a lawyer. But get this: in one of the first of many signs that Marx’s life was rarely boring, during his first year at university he was not only imprisoned for public drunkenness, but also wounded in a duel (2). The sort of stubbornness that would lead one to go through with a duel caused problems throughout his life. He was often drawn into protracted disputes that were not worth the time, energy, and money that he put into them (11).

His father, as you can guess, was not pleased with what he called his son's "wild rampaging," and hoped that a change of scenery would help. So in 1836, Marx agreed to transfer to the University of Berlin (which his father appreciated), but he also changed his area of study from law to philosophy (which his father did not appreciate). In his father's words: "Degeneration in a learned dressing-gown with uncombed hair has replaced degeneration with a beer glass" (3).

It turned out that his father's recriminations were insufficient to convince Marx to take the traditional academic path seriously. But when his father died two years later in 1838, Marx was forced to reckon with the reality that with his father no longer supporting him financially, he needed to support himself—and he began focusing on completing a doctoral dissertation (3).

The good news is that his doctoral thesis was accepted in 1841. The bad news is that he was turned down for all the university professor jobs he applied to. Instead, the intrepid young Marx became a journalist. During these early years of his career, he solidified relationships with two people who would be incredibly significant for the rest of his life. First, in 1843, he married the passionate, wealthy and intellectual social idealist, Jenny von Westphalen—to whom he had been engaged for the previous seven years (4). And the next year, in 1844, he met the equally supportive Friedrich Engels, who would remain his friend and regular financial backer throughout their lives (6-7).

Marx lived the rest of his life, for the most part, as an independent intellectual and activist, which meant that he was largely dependent upon generous friends such as Engels to make ends meet. And if you read through Marx's letters, there are regular laments of being able to barely afford even basic foods such as bread and potatoes. He often resorted to pawn shops, and he even tried at one point to become a railway clerk, but was told that his handwriting was too difficult to read (9).

There was also significant personal loss in Marx's life that is not often well known. Tragically, Karl and Jenny's fourth child died in infancy in 1850, their fifth child died in 1852 within a year of being born, and their third child (a son) died a few years later in 1855 at the age of eight from consumption. I should hasten to add that despite these losses, Marx was known to be an affectionate and caring father for their remaining three daughters: Jenny, Laura, and Eleanor. And in the 1850s, around the

same time as these personal tragedies, the family's financial situation finally improved. Marx began to earn a steadier income from his writings and Jenny was the recipient of two family bequests (10).

Fast forwarding to the 1870s, Marx's health began to deteriorate during the final decade of his life, even as the family financial situation became much healthier. Indeed, in many ways, they had become quite bourgeois, part of the comfortable middle class in London, as contrasted with the wage-earning proletariat class: "They lived in a large house, spent a good deal on furnishing it, sent their children to a ladies' seminary, and travelled to fashionable continental spas. Marx even claimed to have made money on the stock exchange" (12). To be clear, I don't bring this up to accuse Marx of hypocrisy; rather, part of his hope was for a dignified standard of living to be widespread, instead of a deep inequality between owners and workers.

Karl Marx died in 1883 at the age of 64 from bronchitis. His beloved wife Jenny predeceased him by two years, dying after a long illness (14). And as we prepare to wrestle further with his legacy, I do think it's fascinating that toward the end of his life, as his writings were becoming increasingly well known, he was simultaneously becoming frustrated with people he perceived as misinterpreting him. He was known to exclaim: "All I know is that I'm not a Marxist!" (50)! That sentiment reminds me of Carl Jung's proclamation of "Thank God I am Jung and not a Jungian" (Barbara Hannah, *Jung*, 78). Or the bumper sticker, "Jesus, Save Me from Your Followers." In each of these cases, there is a tension between the original inspiration of a founder and the dogmatic disputes and power struggles that tend to arise among disciples that follow in their wake.

It is, however, also true that Marx himself made a lot of strong predictions that did not come to pass in the manner that he anticipated. To limit myself to only three major examples, let's compare what Marx said would happen with what history has borne out:

- While capitalists get richer, workers' wages will, with a few short-lived exceptions, remain at or near the subsistence level. [*In industrialized countries, workers' real wages have risen far above bare subsistence.*]

- The rate of profit will fall. [*Rates of profit rise and fall in different times and places, but the longterm decline that Marx predicted has not eventuated.*]
- Capitalism will collapse or be overthrown because of its internal contradictions. [*Capitalism has gone through several crises, but has not collapsed or been overthrown as a result of internal contradictions. Communists have taken power in less developed nations, rather than in the more industrialized ones.*] (89)

Along these lines, there is an old—and not really that funny joke—that nonetheless exemplifies the dynamic we have been tracing. It goes like this: “How many Marxists does it take to change a lightbulb? None. The lightbulb contains the seeds of its own revolution” (58). As it turns out, however, changing the world—uniting the workers of the world and achieving what our UU Sixth Principle calls “The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all—is a lot more complicated than what is accounted for in Marx’s writings (58).

Perhaps most egregiously, Marx did not anticipate the ways that cruel and corrupt authoritarians such as Joseph Stalin, Mao Zedong, Kim Il-sung, and Pol Pot would commit nightmarish atrocities in Marx’s name (99).

At the same time, don’t get me wrong: unrestrained capitalism has lots of problems as well (100). We’ve reflected on wealth inequality extensively in the past, so for now, to name one among many damning statistics from *this past year* of pandemic, “The world’s 2,365 billionaires enjoyed a \$4 trillion boost to their wealth...increasing their fortunes by 54%” (CBS News). Despite a lot of talk about “essential workers,” neither wages nor labor rights have, for the most part, increased adequately for fair compensation.

For now, as we near the end of this quick tour through Marx’s life and legacy, there is not only much about Marx to criticize, but also many ways that he has inspired activists to work for a freer, more liberated, and equitable world. The point, after all, is not merely to interpret and label the world in various ways, but to *change it*.

Along those lines, to come full circle to last year’s International Workers’ Day sermon, I will confess that, for what it’s worth, dipping my toe back into the old

debates about how best to interpret Marx's writings has left me feeling much freer around Marx. I am at least finding myself much less interested in interpreting Marx's nineteenth-century writings correctly and much more interested in the work of contemporary economists such as Thomas Piketty, who are seeking to update and reimagine the trajectory of Marx's ideas in light of all that we know here in the twenty-first century (105).

I should add that his book is a doorstop, weighing in at more than a thousand pages. But the good news is that there is a film version of his earlier book that is only an hour and forty-two minutes—and it's available for streaming on both Netflix and Kanopy. So that's a much more accessible place to start for anyone interested.

For now, as we discern how we might be able to act individually and collectively in the days to come to change the world for the better—to work for economic justice and the dignity of labor, let's prepare to sing together the classic anthem of the labor rights movement, Solidarity Forever. Note that verse four centers on the "Women of the union." Anyone who identifies as a woman is invited to sing on that verse. May we open the imaginations of our minds and the compassion of our hearts to what might become possible when we all join together in ever-increasing circles of inclusion—in ***Solidarity Forever***.