

The Contest for Memory: Haymarket Through A Revisionist Looking Glass

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Last issue, the *Fifth Estate* announced a ceremony where the famed Haymarket Martyrs Monument in Chicago was to be declared a federally designated National Historic Landmark. Unknown to us, there had been intense agitation by local anarchists against this. G. L. Doebler attended the dedication ceremony and his report makes clear why the opposition was so intense.

I went to Chicago on May 3 to attend the dedication of the Haymarket monument as a U.S. National Park Service Historic Landmark. The irony of a monument to executed anarchists being recognized as “historically significant” by the same government they so vehemently opposed was not lost on me.

Still, I wanted to bear witness to the event as part of the long history of the Haymarket Affair, begun so long ago. On the drizzly night of May 4, 1886, a person still unknown threw a bomb into the ranks of Chicago police who were dispersing a street meeting of anarchists protesting police brutality against workers striking for the eight-hour day.

Eight anarchists — Albert Parsons, August Spies, Adolph Fischer, Oscar Neebe, Louis Lingg, George Engel, Michael Schwab, and Samuel Fielden — were arrested, tried in a farcical trial, and convicted, even though it was proven that none of them was the actual bomb thrower. The prosecution freely admitted the defendants were convicted solely because of their political beliefs.

Five of these men were condemned to death. While Lingg cheated the hangman by committing suicide, the other four, Parsons, Spies, Fischer, and Engel, were hung by the neck until dead. Neebe, Schwab, and Fielden were given stiff jail terms, but later pardoned by Illinois Governor John Altgeld.

The judicial murders of the Chicago anarchists galvanized radicals all over the world. The names of many anarchists and even Communist Party functionaries who chose to be buried in the shadow of the Haymarket monument — Lucy Parsons, Emma Goldman, Voltarine de Cleyre, Ben Reitman, Harry Kelly, William Z. Foster, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn — evoke the memory of an entire generation of activists whose political eyes were opened by the Haymarket executions.

In 1893, a monument was erected over the graves of the Haymarket martyrs by Pioneer Aid and Support Association, an organization whose purpose was to support the imprisoned anarchists and their families and to keep the memory of the fallen comrades alive. A beautiful and inspiring sculpture, it has served as a beacon for radicals around the world for generations.

A Dreamscape of Contrasts

This was the long and venerable history I came to share. It was also the history that the Illinois Labor History Society (ILHS) and the National Park Service were determined to suppress. Walking through the gates of Forest Home (formerly Waldheim) Cemetery that afternoon, it was like Alice through the Looking Glass. I was transported to a dreamscape of contrasts and contradictions, of irony and inverted truths.

Rather than an accurate accounting of the historical significance of the Haymarket martyrs, the afternoon was a well-orchestrated imposition of historical revisionism, coldly calculated to make the martyrs acceptable to a middle-class trade unionism they would never have condoned. Like the monument itself, newly cleaned and refurbished for this dedication, the truth was similarly sanitized and refurbished for the occasion.

Instead of the small group of anarchists and antiquarians I had experienced, I found three or four hundred trade unionists, Illinois Labor History Society (ILHS) members, and representatives of various authoritarian political parties, who, like lampreys attached to sharks, were busy peddling their papers. The site of the monument and surrounding graves was covered with a large, festively striped canopy, rows of folding chairs, and a stage.

If it hadn't been for the absence of ribs and the presence of communists, I'd have sworn I had walked into a Labor Day barbecue. A brass ensemble and German-language chorus were employed for the occasion and as I surveyed the scene, the band struck up a song. "The Internationale"? "The Marseillaise"? No. It was "America the Beautiful." How completely inappropriate, thought Alice. Still, she naively had little inkling that this was merely a portent of the even stranger sights and sounds to come.

With the triumphant strains of a patriotic ode filling the air, the Communist Party dispensed literature from a table on Emma Goldman's grave. A young actress in turn-of-century dress portraying Lucy Parsons mingled with the crowd. When the time came for the official dedication a broadly smiling "Lucy" unveiled the government's small granite marker.

She looked happy and relaxed, more than glad to do the bidding of the Park Service. This was not the real Lucy Parsons who opened her husband's coffin after the executions and cried, "Oh, Albert, they have killed you!" This was not the anarchist firebrand Lucy Parsons who is buried just a few feet away and who struck fear into the hearts of Chicago's ruling class leading marches of the hungry and unemployed.

Patriotism and Benediction

The nicely printed program listed the speakers; the ILHS president; representatives of the Park Service; and an endless list of labor bureaucrats including the president of the Chicago Federation of Labor. Not one anarchist was invited to speak. Not one rank-and-file worker.

Even worse, the ceremony opened with a Catholic benediction. If playing "America the Beautiful" at the graves of men put to death by the state for their anarchist ideals, what can blessing the graves of anarchists be considered? Where were the anarchists? There were some there. Of course, on this side of the looking glass they were the enemy. A small group of comrades from Chicago's Louis Lingg Society and Autonomous Zone gathered close to the monument to protest this profound perversion of history. A group of beefy, burly men wearing union logos on their t-shirts and jackets were present to protect the good citizens gathered to honor the anarchist martyrs for these fearsome real-life anarchists.

When the first speaker took the podium, the anarchists began to shout and chant. The wall of men around the anarchists thickened as reinforcements arrived. "Shut up! You are not respecting the speaker!" "This dedication is a mockery," the anarchists replied. "These men were anarchists!"

When Chicago Monsignor John Egan began intoning his divine utterances, one of the anarchists yelled, "No god, no kings!," and the priest was temporarily drowned out by a sea of catcalls, among them mine. "The church cried out for these men's deaths!" This was more than I could take.

An Anarchist Could Speak

Pushing and shoving erupted between the anarchists and the goon squad. Some punches were thrown. Then it was over. A truce was struck.

The dedication officials promised that an anarchist could speak from the podium if the protesters stopped disrupting the ceremony, a promise on which they later reneged. Although there was no more violence, the goon squad, with backup from the Forest Park cops, cordoned off the protesters during the rest of the proceedings. No damned anarchists were going to disrupt the government's dedication of the preeminent anarchist historical site in North America. The government killed 'em and goddammit, the government would bloody well dedicate 'em, too.

With the exception of Carlos Cortez, longtime Wobbly, poet, and artist, who was limited to reading a poem, not one person spoke who could even be called a radical or a leftist, let alone an anarchist. There were brief introductions of descendants of some of the martyrs, and historian Paul Avrich gave a brief description of the Haymarket Affair, but never was it mentioned that the men whose monument was being dedicated were anarchists.

Instead, speaker after speaker characterized the martyrs as "labor activists" who died for "worker's rights," good American trade unionists who lost their lives in the fight for the eight-hour day, a fair day's wage for a fair day's work, mom, and apple pie. Pious labor hacks invoked the memory of the martyrs in support of everything for pro-labor legislation to saving Social Security.

Mercifully, Alice's trip through the revisionist looking glass soon ended. For the moment at least, the history of the Haymarket martyrs was rewritten. The government's plaque reads: "This monument represents the labor movement's struggle for workers' rights and possesses the history of the United States."

This statement is amazing both for what it does and what it doesn't say. It is, to paraphrase Voltaire, a plaque of lies played on the dead. There is no mention of anarchism, of the struggle for liberation from religious superstition and government, of the ideal that the fruits of the Earth and of human toil should be shared by all, of the sham that was, and is, American justice.

The ILHS should be shamed. Entrusted by the Pioneer Aid Society with the deed to this monument, they have betrayed that trust by perverting the memory of the martyrs. Purporting to be historians, they have violated the historian's ethical responsibility to tell the truth about the past. Claiming to be guardians of the history of labor, they have done a great disservice to working people by denying them the real history of the Haymarket martyrs and their anarchism.

The truth is that the anarchism of the Haymarket martyrs provided the vision of a just society that inspired working men and women to fight against their oppression. And the anarchist movement provided some of the best fighters in that struggle. They did not, however, fight for the eight-hour day, or higher wages, or pro-union legislation. They fought to abolish the wage system, destroy government, explode religion, and manifestly change the very foundation of human society.

To now call them "labor activists fighting for the 8-hour day" and invoke their memory in support of "democratic rights on the job" and "trade union rights" is to perpetrate an unforgivable act of historical revisionism. To consecrate the Haymarket monument as a National Historic Landmark while strong-arming protesters and forbidding anarchists from speaking — and to pretend not to see the sinister irony and cynical deceit — is a moral and historical outrage of Orwellian proportions.

Don't get me wrong. I'm glad that organized labor recognizes the part that the Haymarket martyrs played in its history and I welcome working people everywhere to learn about and claim the legacy of Haymarket; however, if the price of that recognition is the denial of the ideals of the martyrs and the truth of the Haymarket Affair, we must protest that it is at too dear a cost.

Albert Parsons said, "Every great robbery that was ever perpetrated upon a people has been by virtue of and in the name of law." He did not ask for laws to "protect" working people.

Louis Lingg said, "I despise you. I despise your order, your laws, your force-propped authority." He would not have been satisfied with the New Deal. Adolph Fischer said, "I was tried... for murder, but I was convicted on Anarchy." He did not claim to be a martyr for the eight-hour day.

August Spies predicted that "the day will come when our silence will be more powerful than the voices you are throttling today."

Sadly, that magnificent silence is being prostituted by the ILHS on behalf of bankrupt business unionism.

Keeping the truth alive about the 1970 murders of students at Kent and Jackson State face similar disinformation efforts and co-optation. We keep the truth alive and honor the fallen by gathering every May 4 at Kent State University as a living monument.

Similarly, anarchists can keep the truth of Haymarket alive by gathering at the monument every May 1 to claim it as our own.

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