

Rescuing Lucy Parsons for the anarchist movement

**Review: Lucy Parsons: Freedom, Equality and Solidarity: Writings and
Speeches, 1878 – 1937. Edited Gale Ahrens Published by Charles H. Kerr**

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May 5, 2005

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Gale Ahrens has done the anarchist movement a real service in putting together this collection, which should rescue Lucy Parsons from the dark corner she has existed in. In it she emerges from the shadow of her martyred husband as a central if neglected figure in the development of anarchism in the USA.

Lucy has unfortunately been remembered mostly as the widow of the Haymarket martyr Albert Parsons, executed in Chicago in 1887. But this book reveals her activism to have started nearly a decade earlier and to have ended nearly fifty years later. For much of this period she was at the core of the revolutionary anarchist movement in the USA and many so of her writings retain a real relevancy today.

Lucy and Albert arrived in Chicago in the 1870's and together threw themselves into the revolutionary socialist movement that was growing there. The first letter in this collection was one sent by Lucy to 'The socialists' almost eight years before Haymarket. It uses the example of a glass workers lockout to argue against the idea that there can be any partnership between bosses and workers. This was a theme she was to return to again and again in her writings over the decades to come.

Organiser

By 1879 Lucy was one of the main organizers of the Working Women's Union and in 1883 Lucy and Albert took part in the founding of the Chicago section of the anarchist International Working Peoples Association. She was a frequent contributor to the anarchist paper 'The Alarm' and a co-leader of important working class demonstrations in 1884 and 1885.

The anarchists of Chicago were no fringe movement but rather the main leadership of the Chicago unions and in particular the struggle for the eight-hour day. Following the general strike of May 1st 1886 the state used the excuse of a police riot during which seven policemen died (mostly after being shot in the crossfire from other police guns) to crush this movement. A rigged trial was used to smash the anarchist's influence and jail or execute eight of the most prominent anarchists. These events which led to Mayday becoming an international day of working class solidarity are covered in great detail elsewhere — relevant to this review is that Albert, Lucy's husband was one of those executed.

Quite naturally these events threw a shadow across the rest of her life but contrary to what is often implied they did not form the sole focus of her future activity. On a speaking tour of Britain in 1888 it was observed that "*she came as a propagandist to whom tragedy had given a stronger voice.*" Later in 1909 she was also to tour Canada — this time as an IWW agitator. For the next 50 years she would be active in many anarchist and campaign groups as well.

Communist?

Towards the end of her life when the US anarchist movement has largely collapsed she was active in the Communist Party dominated 'International Labour Defense'. Unfortunately this allowed some to claim she had joined the Communist Party — a claim that is too often repeated by many anarchists today. In fact there is no evidence for this. The CP did publish an obituary when she died it but did not claim she was ever a member — surely a major oversight if she had been. Her own attitude to working with the ILD is probably best expressed in her 1930 May

Day speech, which delivered at the age of 77. In it she appeals for support for the “*hundreds and hundreds*” of CP members in prison cells but she also declares “*I am an anarchist: I have no apology to make to a single man women or child, because I am an anarchist, because anarchism carries the very germ of liberty in its womb.*”

At the age of 81 she replies to an anarchist who had written to her about the state of the US movement at that time. She says “*Anarchism has not produced any organized ability in the present generation, only a few loose struggling groups scattered over this vast country, that come together in conferences occasionally, talk to each other, then go home*”... “*Do you call this a movement?*” ... “*I went to work for the International Labour Defense (ILD) because I wanted to do a little something to help defend the victims of capitalism who got into trouble, and not always be talking, talking, talking.*”

Lucy on organistion

One of the striking things about reading Lucy’s writing is how relevant many of her comments are to the US anarchist movement today. As a frequent contributor to the anarchist press and the editor of the anarchist and pro IWW paper ‘The Liberator’ she understood how important a serious commitment to organization and large-scale publication was. “*There is no way of building up a movement, strengthening it, and keeping it intact except by a press, at least weeklies if dailies are impossible*”... “*The Liberator is the only English-language anarchist propaganda paper in America; for this reason, comrades and sympathizers in all parts of the country should feel in duty bound to support this paper, write for it, contribute to its support financially, and make its success their personal concern.*”

Writing in 1907 she observed, “*The Anarchistic cause (there has been no movement in recent years) has lacked a plan of procedure or organization.*” The existing groups “*were composed, for the most part, of young, inexperienced people who had about as many conceptions of the real aims of Anarchism as there were members of the group ... I, personally, have always held to the idea of organization, together with an assumption of responsibility by the members, such as paying monthly dues and collecting funds for propaganda purposes. For holding these views I have been called an ‘old school’ anarchist, etc.*”

This is an example of her serious approach towards organization. She was involved in the Syndicalist League which argued for involvement in the mass unions as well as building the IWW. This along with her willingness to generally argue for involvement in mass working class organizations suggests she is one of the few 20th century US anarchists making arguments similar to the organizational and interventionist currents of anarchist-communism. However there is no hint in this collection that she was even aware of the similar debates around ‘the platform’ happening within the European anarchist movement in the mid 1920’s.

Sex, race and class

Apart from being known as the widow of Albert Parsons Lucy has also received some coverage because she was a women of colour in a movement whose leadership was nearly always white and male. This collection carries a number of her articles on women and racism and from these it is easy to see why Lucy has not received a lot more publicity from modern US anarchists.

In summary Lucy may have argued for armed self-defense as the right response to racist lynchings some 80 years before Malcom X but her approach to the question of racism would quickly lead today to her being labeled today as a 'class reductionist'. In 1886 in response to lynchings in the south she asked "*Are there any so stupid to believe these outrages have been, are being and will be heaped upon the Negro because he is black? Not at all. It is because he is poor. It is because he is dependent. Because he is poorer as a class than his white wage-slave brother of the North.*"

Her attitude on women's struggles was similar. While speaking at the founding convention of the IWW in 1905 she said "*I have taken the floor because no other women has responded*" but continued "*Wherever wages are to reduced the capitalist class use women to reduce them, and if there is anything that you men should do in the future it is to organize the women.*"

In this context it is easy to understand the obscurity Lucy Parsons was allowed to fall into by the US anarchist movement. At it became increasing hostile to organisation and organisational discipline, as identity politics was pushed to the fore over class politics Lucy Parsons cut an increasingly awkward historical figure precisely because she was a woman of colour. Perhaps her arguments are overly reductionist but at a stage when some who call themselves anarchists seemed to have altogether lost sight of the importance of class struggle they are a useful encouragement to look again.

This collection goes some considerable way to putting Lucy Parsons back at the centre of the development of the anarchist movement in the USA. It is not necessary to agree with everything she wrote to see that she adds a very valuable perspective to the debates that have come to dominate that movement today.

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Retrieved on 8th August 2021 from anarkismo.net
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