

# Women in the Haymarket Event

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A remarkable group of people led the Chicago workers' movement of the 1880s. Perhaps most astonishing is that these people accorded men and women equality, and women filled prominent positions of leadership, during an era in which women were generally viewed as culturally and biologically inferior to men. In a country which has failed to adopt the Equal Rights Amendment in the 1980s, the International Working People's Association a century ago — in 1883 — directed two of its six major points to equality between the sexes: "Fourth-organization of education on a secular, scientific and equal basis for both sexes. Fifth-Equal rights for all without distinction to sex or race."

The women within the IWPA lived up to these expectations of equality. Lucy Parsons and Lizzie Holmes stand out as leaders in the International Working People's Association in Chicago prior to the Haymarket police riot. These two women frequently contributed to radical publications and worked to organize the sewing-women for the eight-hour day in 1886. Lizzie Holmes was the assistant editor of the *Alarm*, of which Albert Parsons was editor. Lucy Parsons and Lizzie Holmes led the march on the new Chicago Board of Trade (better known to them as the Board of Thieves) on April 28, 1885. Lucy Parsons was well known as a forceful and articulate speaker as well as writer. A third female comrade, Sarah E. Ames, would play an important role in Haymarket events and would become head of Women's Knights of Labor Assembly 1789. That these leaders were female may have contributed to the authorities' decision not to include them in the indictments and frameups following Haymarket. But their sex did not prevent them from playing crucial roles in the anarchist movement. Nor did it exempt them from other forms of police brutality and harassment.

The movement was a "family affair," with picnics and socials arranged for all, including small children. The political beliefs of the activists were woven into the fabric of their lives and the lives of their families. The Schnaubelt family, including Maria Schnaubelt Schwab, her sister Ida and perhaps their mother Rebecca, were activists. Lizzie Holmes' mother Hannah J. Hunt and her sister Lillie D. White both wrote for the radical paper *Lucifer*, published in Kansas by Moses Harman. Lizzie and her sister led an organizing effort in the sewing shop where they worked.

On the evening of May 4, 1886, Lucy Parsons and Lizzie Holmes were planning strategy for the sewing women's organizing drive, when an individual arrived at their meeting at the *Alarm* office to request Albert Parsons' presence as a speaker at Haymarket Square. They adjourned their

meeting, and the three adults with Lucy and Albert's two small children proceeded to Haymarket Square.

The five of them were in Zepf's Hall when the bomb was thrown and the police opened fire on the crowd. Knowing that something dreadful had occurred, Lizzie urged Albert to leave the city that night and to assess the situation and safety of his return at a distance. Lucy went home with the children, while Lizzie accompanied Albert to the train station and bought his ticket. Albert went to Geneva, Illinois to William and Lizzie Holmes' house, and Lizzie returned to the Parsons' apartment in the city to spend the night with Lucy.

The next morning, Lucy Parsons and Lizzie Holmes hurried to the Alarm and Arbeiter-Zeitung offices, determined that the next issue of The Alarm should come out denouncing the latest police atrocity. The police raided the newspaper office at least three times that morning, and by noon, August Spies, Michael Schwab, Adolph Fischer, Gerhard Lizius, Oscar Neebe, Chris Spies, Lucy Parsons, Lizzie Holmes, and Maria Schwab had all been arrested at the office. The police released Lucy, hoping she would lead them to Albert; they arrested her two more times that day. Sarah Ames was arrested that evening with Lucy, but they were released. Lucy immediately sent out circulars to all IWPA sections, informing them that the Alarm and Arbeiter-Zeitung had been suppressed, that many comrades were in jail, and that money was desperately needed.

The authorities held Lizzie Holmes in jail until her arraignment on May 6, when her brother paid the \$500 bail. Lizzie retained a woman attorney from Milwaukee, Kate Kane. Lucy Parsons took charge of the situation for the radicals at the arraignment of Lizzie Holmes and Adolph Fischer. The charges against Lizzie Holmes were eventually dropped.

Meanwhile, in Geneva, Illinois, William Holmes and Albert Parsons read the news from Chicago. William dissuaded Albert from returning to Chicago immediately. Albert believed that in all likelihood Lucy had already sacrificed her life for the cause. He expected to fight on the barricades at any moment. Eventually, however, he was persuaded to leave the state and seek a more secure refuge. With Lizzie Holmes in jail, it was only a matter of time before Holmes' residence would be searched.

Albert Parsons communicated with Lucy through William Holmes from his hiding place in Wisconsin and asked her to consult with the defense attorneys as to their opinion about whether he should return. Lucy met twice with the attorneys to discuss Albert's offer to return. William R Black, chief counsel, was enthusiastic. He was certain Parsons' appearance would help the case and would be a dramatic statement of Parsons' innocence. Black was confident that an acquittal would be obtained; he vastly underestimated the powers arrayed- against Parsons. Lucy communicated with Albert to come, and his return was set for June 21, 1886, the opening day of the trial. Albert went to Sarah Ames' house when he arrived in Chicago, where Lucy joined him for a few hours before they went to court for his surrender.

Lucy Parsons, Lizzie Holmes, Sarah Ames and family members of the other defendants attended the trial daily. Among the many women who attended ,the trial was young Nina Van Zandt, a recent Vassar graduate. Though she perhaps attended out of curiosity at first, she came to have great respect and empathy for the men on trial and for their idealism.

Lucy Parsons' article "To Tramps" was introduced by the prosecution as evidence against the defendants. Lizzie Holmes took the witness stand to defend her own article "Notice To Tramps" which appeared in The Alarm April 26, 1886, and to state what happened the night of May 4, 1886. Captain Schaack threatened to arrest the two most notorious women, Lizzie Holmes and Lucy Parsons. Their dedicated work did not go unnoticed by the police.

On August 20, the jury returned a guilty verdict against all eight men. Seven were sentenced to death and the eighth, Oscar Neebe, to 15 years in prison. The women heard the verdict. Maria Schwab fainted into Lucy Parsons' and Sarah Ames' arms. Christine Spies, August Spies' mother, and his sister Gretchen comforted each other. Kate Kane, the lawyer from Milwaukee, was with the defendants' families.

Following the condemned men's speeches in court on October 7–9, 1886, execution was set for December 3, 1886. Lucy Parsons left immediately on a tour of the east to bring the message of her and her comrades' movement to the people and to raise money for the appeals. She reached an estimated 200,000 persons in 16 states. In Chicago, other women carried on the work. Sixteen-year-old Mary Engel, George Engel's daughter, was especially active in promoting the radical cause.

Public opinion began to shift in favor of the condemned men, and Lucy Parsons' speaking efforts were no small part of that change. She pleaded the innocence of her comrades to the murder charge, yet defended their revolutionary goals in uncompromising terms. She parodied the capitalist press when she spoke in New Haven. "You may have expected me to belch forth great flames of dynamite and stand before you with bombs in my hands. If you are disappointed, you have only the capitalist press to thank for it." She was encouraged by the Yale students who braved a heavy rainstorm to attend her talk, and who remained to ask questions after the lecture.

Audiences were impressed by Lucy's intellect, her sincerity and her low musical voice which commanded attention. Her tall dark figure, her black dress, her piercing black eyes and her eloquence left a lasting impression on her listeners, many of whom wrote letters on her comrades' behalf and contributed money and time to the defense.

On Thanksgiving Day, the Chief Justice of the Illinois Supreme Court granted a stay of execution. Back in Chicago, Lucy Parsons spoke at a gala socialist celebration. The radicals had reason to celebrate; they believed their comrades had hope. After Thanksgiving, Lucy traveled to St. Louis, Kansas City and Omaha. In March she went east again and was jailed in Columbus, Ohio, when she attempted to speak. Her arrest made national headlines. A woman supporter, Mrs. Lyndall, was the only visitor permitted to see her; she brought Lucy her meals, thereby sparing her from the jail menu of bread and water and salt.

As avenues of recourse for the prisoners were exhausted, Lucy and Albert Parsons remained adamant that there would be no appeal for mercy. After the Illinois Supreme Court denied the appeal for a new trial in September, 1887, the executions were set for November 11, 1887. The last resort was a campaign of appeals to the governor. For over a year Lucy had said she could not accept a justice which spared her husband and killed her other comrades; Lucy and Albert refused to join in the appeals for clemency.

Lucy did, however, continue her appeal to the people on the streets of Chicago. She sold copies of General Matthew M. Trumbull's *Was It A Fair Dial?* for a nickel each. She distributed copies of Albert Parsons' tract, *An Appeal to the People of America*.

Meanwhile, other women were active in laying the case before the governor. On November 9, 1887, two days before the scheduled executions, Maria Schwab, Johanna Fischer, Christine Spies, Gretchen Spies, Mary Engel, Elise Friedel (Louis Lingg's friend), and Hortensia Black, wife of chief counsel for defense, William P. Black, were among the women closely associated with the case who made the trip to Springfield to beseech the governor for clemency for the men. The Amnesty Association was represented in Springfield by a man and a woman—its president, Lucien S. Oliver and the spiritualist/reformer, Cora L. V. Richmond.

Letters in support of the condemned men came from outstanding women from around the world: from Eleanor Marx, who had visited the prisoners; from South African novelist Olive Schreiner; from Annie Besant of the National Secular Society in England; from Charlotte Wilson of the Freedom Group in England, associated with Peter Kropotkin; and from Dr. Mary Herma Aiken of Grinnell, Iowa, who organized a small section of the International Working People's Association there.

Governor Oglesby commuted the sentences of Schwab and Fielden to life imprisonment; he let stand the death sentences of August Spies, Albert Parsons, Adolph Fischer, George Engel and Louis Lingg. Lucy Parsons and Lizzie and William Holmes went to the jail on the evening of November 10, after the governor had announced his decision, for a final visit with Albert. They were not admitted, but a deputy sheriff told Lucy she could see Albert at 8:30 am the following morning.

November 11, 1887, dawned icy and blustery in Chicago. Lucy, Lizzie and the two children went to the jail. Instead of allowing them to see Albert, the police played games with them, sending them from one corner of the block to the next, promising that someone at the next corner could authorize their entrance. The children were turning blue with cold, shivering and crying. Finally, the police refused Lucy's last request that the children alone be permitted to see their father. In desperation, she attempted to cross the police line. The four were arrested and taken to the Chicago Avenue station where they were all stripped and searched for bombs. They were held in cells while the men were executed. Just after noon the matron came to tell them, "It's all over." Lizzie could not see Lucy, but could hear "her low, despairing moans." Friends who came to try to see them were turned away; William Holmes was threatened with arrest if he lingered in the vicinity. At 3 pm, the women and children were finally released. Nina Van Zandt Spies and her mother had also been rudely turned away by the police that day when they attempted to visit August Spies for the last time.

Lucy broke down completely when Albert's body was brought home to her apartment. The women who had been with her through the eighteen-month ordeal were with her to offer what little comfort they could. Sarah Ames and Lizzie Holmes stayed with her through the day. Mrs. Fielden held and comforted Albert Jr. and Lulu. Scenes of grief were taking place at the homes of August Spies, Adolph Fischer and George Engel.

There was one last thing Lucy wanted to do for Albert. She got the embroidered red flag which she had carried at the Board of Trade demonstration, carefully folded and braided it, and fastened it lovingly across his body. The mayor had decreed that no red flags would fly in the wind in this funeral procession, but Lucy determined that this red flag would be in the procession and would be with Albert in his grave.

In the first carriage behind Albert's coffin were Lucy Parsons, Lizzie Holmes, Sarah Ames, and Mrs. Fielden. An estimated 125,000 people solemnly lined the streets of Chicago in quiet tribute to the men who had died.

In these last awful months, Lucy Parsons, with the help of Lizzie and William Holmes, worked to publish *Anarchism: Its Philosophy and Scientific Basis* by Albert R. Parsons, which appeared in December, 1887. The printer delivered 300 copies before the rest were confiscated by the police.

Women were dedicated and successful organizers for the International Working People's Association and the Knights of Labor before Haymarket. They contributed tremendously to the campaign for justice for their comrades and to keeping the Haymarket case and the social injustices of the age before the public long after the executions.

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