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Haymarket Incident

Dave Roediger

1992

On May 4, 1886, a bomb was thrown as local police attacked an anarchist-led labor demonstration in Chicago's Haymarket Square. Eight policemen died as a result of the bombing and of crossfire among police. An undetermined, but probably larger, number of demonstrators lost their lives amidst the tumult and police gunfire. The identity of the bomb-thrower remains a mystery, but the events leading up to Haymarket, and the tremendous repercussions of the bombing, are more clear.

The Haymarket Square demonstration grew out of a massive nationwide movement of working people demanding the eight-hour working day. That demand had begun to attract support during the Civil War as workers identified their long hours as a kind of "slavery" from which they could be "emancipated" by legislation. After the war, EightHour Leagues boomed in membership and successfully lobbied for eight-hour laws in several states. But these laws almost all featured gaping loopholes. In Illinois, Chicago Eight-Hour Leagues were instrumental in securing the passage of a shorter-hours law in 1867, albeit an unenforceable one. On May 1 of that year, tens of thousands of Chicago workers attempted to make the statute apply by striking. Their actions failed, largely as a result of

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police violence, but the episode in that booming industrial city presented in microcosm trends that would mature in the next twenty years and lead toward Haymarket.

By the early 1880s, radical workers in Chicago and elsewhere had accumulated further grievances against the political system, especially in the bloody suppression of the 1877 railroad strike and in subsequent local elections in which socialist candidates charged that fraud had “counted them out” of victory. Three separate national organizational responses resulted, all of them seeking to reconcile republican citizenship with industrial society and to address the question of how the labor movement should interact with a government hostile to labor action. The oldest of these organizations, the Knights of Labor (founded 1869), preached the virtues of cooperatives, of working-class self-education, of agitation for political reform, of cultivation of good relations with local politicians, of organization of both skilled and unskilled workers, and of caution in undertaking strikes. Irish-American workers strongly supported the Knights of Chicago. The Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions (founded 1881, evolved into the American Federation of Labor in 1886) stressed trade union organizing and sought to avoid politically divisive issues and reliance on the state in labor-reform matters. The smallest organization, the International Working People’s Association (founded 1881) mixed anarchism, socialism, and syndicalism. The IWPA utterly rejected both politics and reform while embracing revolutionary self-defense and writing romantically about the possibility of dynamite as a tool for labor militants. It attracted substantial support among German, Czech, and Scandinavian immigrants. Its Chicago branch, led by Albert Parsons, Lucy Parsons, and August Spies, emphasized the role of industrial unions and farm organizations in providing the basis for a new and stateless society.

Lines dividing these various approaches to labor organization were extremely fluid, with many activists easily switching organizational affiliations or even belonging to different groups simulta-

neously. In Chicago, with the approach of the May 1, 1886, date designated by the FOTLU for transition to an eight-hour day, Knights, craft unionists, and the IWPAers who helped lead the large Central Labor Union joined forces to build a huge strike involving perhaps 80,000 workers.

During this strike, it became apparent that Mayor Carter Harrison, who earlier had urged restraint in the policing of labor disputes, had abandoned such a policy in favor of the stance of his appointee, police captain John Bonfield, who held that “the club today saves the bullet tomorrow.” On May 3, lumber workers rallying for the eight-hour day joined strikers from the McCormick Harvest Works, involved in a separate labor dispute, to harass strikebreakers at the latter establishment. Police fired into the crowd, killing at least two and wounding many strikers. The anarchist leader August Spies had spoken to the lumber workers and witnessed the bloodshed. The IWPA, which had promised to defend the eight-hour strikes against the kind of police, Pinkerton, and National Guard violence that had caused scores of workers to die in the 1877 strike wave, called the May 4 meeting at Haymarket to protest police violence and to memorialize the victims at McCormick Works. Tensions ran high as employers’ associations and the press demanded decisive antistrike measures while one version of the IWPA’s leaflets against police violence bore the headline: REVENGE WORKINGMEN, TO ARMY!

The demonstration in Haymarket Square was itself uneventful until the police attacked. Rain was heavy and attendance light. Mayor Harrison, who came as an observer, found the gathering peaceable and orderly. But after the mayor and most of the demonstrators had departed, Captain Bonfield led 180 police in an attempt to break up the rally. Moments later, the bomb exploded, sparking a police riot.

The first fruits of the bombing were accelerated campaigns of repression against the eight-hour strikers, anarchists, and labor leaders in Chicago and, to an extent, nationally. Chicago’s press mixed

anti-immigrant, anti labor union and antiradical stereotypes in a hysterical campaign against anarchist “serpents,” who were seen as the “offscourings of Europe.” Police for weeks kept up a steady pattern of raids on Chicago labor leaders’ homes and labor organizations’ headquarters, and their spurious reports of finding caches of arms and explosives just as steadily splashed across front pages of the city’s daily papers.

Eight IWPA members were prosecuted in this atmosphere for conspiracy to murder policeman Mathias Degan, who died at Haymarket. In their trial, State’s Attorney Julius Grinnell affirmed that “anarchy” was the real defendant and, as Paul Avrich has recently put it, judge Joseph E. Gary “flaunted his bias against the defendants” at every turn. All eight defendants received guilty verdicts in August 1886, though no evidence specifically linked them to the bomb. In November of the following year, four of them—August Spies, Albert Parsons, George Engel, and Adolph Fischer—were executed by hanging. A fifth condemned anarchist, Louis Lingg, killed himself in jail. Oscar Neebe, Samuel Fielden, and Michael Schwab stayed in jail until released in 1893 by Illinois governor John Peter Altgeld, whose stinging pardon message acknowledged the injustice of the trial.

Haymarket’s bomb echoed long and deep. The explosion and ensuing repression decimated the anarchist labor movement, though the martyred defendants became heroes to many and inspired countless individual conversions to anarchism and to socialism. Victimized too were the Knights of Labor, who suffered both from the general repression of worker’s organizations and from the refusal of their national leadership to endorse the broad-based campaign in defense of those accused as a result of the bombing. The pardons ruined Altgeld’s promising political career. The tactic of the mass strike was far less appealing to pragmatic U.S. labor leaders after Haymarket, and the idea of self-defense by labor never again received so broad a hearing on the national scale. On an international scale, the Haymarket events and 1886

eight-hour strikes contributed to the 1889 decision of the Second International to adopt May 1 as World Labor Day.

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