

The Chicago Anarchists

John Creaghe

1 November 1891

On the 11th of November, the Anarchists of Sheffield will commemorate the death of five comrades slain in cold blood by the enemies of the workers in Chicago, U.S. on the same day of the year 1887; and in all England, and all other parts of the world meetings will be held for the same purpose.

These men were killed, not because they did what they were charged with the evidence proved distinctly the contrary, — but because they were trying to lead the workers, as we are trying, on the only true path to their emancipation — the Social Revolution.

We mourn for the brave men cruelly torn from us, but we rejoice at the sacrifice made, for it has taught the workers all over the world much more than years of propaganda by speech and writing could. It has made them realize fully that the struggle they are engaged in with the capitalists is nothing less than an implacable war. and that it is foolish to expect from their enemies anything but the treatment that one enemy expects from another in actual warfare. Of course it also teaches the workers their duty to themselves and their class under the present circumstances. It serves also to show them clearly that law is only a weapon in the hands of property, for its own defence against the workers, for in this case the law murdered these men in spite of the fact that it could bring no evidence to show that they had done what they were charged with

But what can men expect who are tried by a tribunal of their enemies, police, judges, jury and lawyers all belonging to the class they are fighting to destroy and paid to act for and please that class. It is cowardly as well as absurd for us to complain when we meet the fate which we ourselves ought to give to our enemy when the war requires it. But it is contemptible hypocrisy on the part of our enemies to pretend that their law is intended for anything but our repression, and to call the farce of a trial such as that of our comrades in Chicago by the sacred name of Justice.

We subjoin a sketch of the circumstances which led to it taken from the pamphlet called the “Chicago Martyrs”, which gives in full the speeches of the men, and which we will have on sale at the Hall of Science, where our meeting will be held on the 11th.

During 1872–78, great demonstrations took place in most of the United States in favour of the eight hours working day. This movement was so strong as to induce the legislative assemblies of different states to fix eight hours as the working day but was not recognized in practice by the

makers of the law, and the working classes soon become convinced that a lessening of the hour of labour could only be obtained by organization.

At the General Conference of the National Labor Union in 1885, it was definitely resolved that the eight hours day should be introduced all over the states from May 1st, 1886, by a general strike. An eight hours association was formed in Chicago, open air meetings were held, and in the halls where the different labour associations met, speeches were delivered and agitation was carried on with the object of teaching the workers to organize. The Socialist and Anarchist Groups were less sanguine as to the benefit to be obtained by the movement. The "Alarm" (Parson's Paper) did not oppose the movement, but it said it would be inefficient still their spokesmen were not less active in the general movement for awakening the feeling of solidarity among the workers. "The Alarm" was the English Anarchist Organ; the Arbeiter Zeitung on which Spies and Schwab were the principal writers, was the most important German Anarchist Organ. Parsons, Spies, Fielden, Engel were among the most prominent speakers at the labour meetings and familiar names, not to the working men only.

The employers on the other hand, already organized, drew still closer together to resist their employees. Conflicts between masters and men broke out. The most noticeable being the one at McCormack's reaper works, in February 1886, when the master against his agreement, tried to force the men out of their organizations. Twelve hundred men were thrown out here. The excitement deepened as the first of May approached. The day arrived. Thousands of workmen stopped work and claimed an eight hour day. The Central Labor Union of Chicago convened a Mass Meeting, at which 25,000 people attended. Spies, Parsons, Fielden, and Schwab spoke. The stoppage of work increased. Within a few days more than 50,000 strikers were out. Workmen's meetings increased. The police got anxious. The capitalists trembled with fear and rage. The employers made concessions. The labour cause was triumphant.

On May Second, there was a great meeting of men locked out of McCormack's works, to protest against the violence of the police. Parsons and Schwab spoke.

On May Third another meeting was called by the Lumber Shovers' Union, near McCormack's factory. Spies was invited and spoke. At four o'clock the "scabs" were seen leaving the factory, and some stones were thrown. The police were telephoned for and came in large numbers. They were received with stones and replied with their revolvers, and six men of the strikers were killed and many wounded.

It was resolved to call a meeting the next night at the Haymarket to protest against the police assaults. The meeting was a quiet one, and at the close of Parsons speech, the Mayor of Chicago who attended the meeting for the purpose of dispersing it, if need should arise, left the meeting and went over to the police station and told Capt. Bonfield that he had better give orders to his reserves to go home. Toward the close when many had left including Parsons and his family, suddenly 180 police turned out of the station, marching with his baton and in fighting formation, and with arms in readiness to the Haymarket where only a row hundred persons remained. The Captain of the first row of police had just ordered the meeting to disperse, and his men, without waiting a reply, were advancing to the attack, when a small fiery body arched through the air, alighted between the first and second companies of the police, and exploded with a loud report. About 60 of the police were thrown down and one was killed. Instantly firing began, and the people fled terrified in all directions followed by the police who fired at random as they followed. The capitalists of Chicago now got into a frenzy: the coolest not only seemed to lose their heads,

but absolutely lost them. The police arrested people right and left, broke into private houses without warrants and ransacked all they contained.

The Haymarket speakers, except Parsons who had left Chicago, were arrested; those who had taken a prominent part in labour meetings and were known as labour organizers were hunted and imprisoned. The Arbeiter Zeitung was suppressed, and all its printers and editors put in jail. When the friends of the arrested men tried to restart it, it had to pass under the censorship of the chief of police. The meetings of workmen were prohibited or broken up. The most exciting tales about infernal conspiracies against the life and property of the citizens were circulated. The daily papers were howling "crucify them" against the leading anarchists and socialists, as if they had been already proved guilty. The eight hours movement was checked, and the results obtained in many cases lost again. The police assumed a mysterious silence, while at the same time they hinted that they were heaping up the most crushing and annihilating evidence against the perpetrators of the crime as pointed out by "public opinion;"

On May 17th, the Grand Jury came together: "The body is a strong one," says a telegram from Chicago to a New York daily, "and it is safe to aver that anarchy and murder will not receive much quarter at the hands of the men composing it. It is certain that Spies, Parsons, Schwab and other inciters to outrage will be indicted." And indicted they were. The indictment contained sixty-nine counts charging the defendants August Spies, Michael Schwab, Samuel Fielden, Albert R. Parsons, Adolph Fischer, George Engel, Louis Lingg, Oscar W. Neebe, Rudolph Schnaubelt and William Seliger with the murder of M. J. Degan. Schnaubelt and Parsons were not in the hands of the police but when the trial came on Parsons, conscious of his innocence, presented himself at the bar of the court. Seliger had turned informer. On June 21st, the empanelling of the jury before judge Josep Gary began. About a thousand were examined. Of this number only 5 or 6 belonged to the labour class, and they were all challenged and refused by the state.

The remainder were all employers of labour or men dependent upon that class as clerks or the like. Most declared they had a prejudice against anarchists, socialists, and communists as a class. This however, that worthy mouthpiece of justice, judge Gary, ruled was no cause to exclude them from the jury. And when a talesman declared he had already conceived and perhaps expressed an opinion to the guilt of the defendants, or even that he would want some very strong evidence of the innocence of the defendants before acquitting them, the judge took him in hand and led him until he could admit that to put aside his prejudice be that perhaps he might be able and act entirely on the evidence, when he had done this he was declared competent. On the motion for a new trial an affidavit was produced wherein it was sworn that the special bailiff Henry Ryce had said to well-known men in Chicago that he was managing this case and well knew what he was about; that those fellows should hang as certain as death, and that he was only summoning such men as jurors as would not be acceptable to the defendants.

The empanelling of the jury occupied 52 days. On July 13 state's attorney Grinnell began his address charging the defendants with murder and conspiracy, and promising to show the jury who threw the bomb.

The most important witnesses for the state were Waller, Schrader, und Seliger, all formerly comrades of the defendants, now turned informers from fear of the gallows, or hope of gain, promised them by the police. Waller was to prove the conspiracy to throw the bomb at the Haymarket, but had to admit that the police were not expected at that meeting nor was one word said about a bomb or dynamite when it was resolved to call the Haymarket meeting. Since the ex-

execution of the condemned men Paulina Brandes, a sister of Waller, has sworn an affidavit before Judge Eberhardt upsetting the whole of his evidence.

The theory of the state connecting the anarchists with the Haymarket bomb completely broke down. But the fact remained that Degan and seven other policemen had died, sixty policemen wounded, and that these had spoken strong words against the whole existing order of things, the unfair distribution of labour and wealth, against class laws and their hired upholders, against the tyranny of the state and the foul wangs it shelters. That was their crime, that was the real issue. On August 20th, the jury returned the verdict: "We the jury, find the defendants, August Spies, Michael Schwab, Samuel Fielden, Albert R. Parsons, Adolph Fischer, George Engel and Louis Lingg guilty of murder in manner and form as charged in the indictment and fix the penalty at death. We find the defendant Oscar W. Neebe guilty of murder in manner and form as charged in the indictment and fix the penalty as imprisonment in the penitentiary for fifteen years." The attorneys for defence: W. P. Black, Foster, Salomon and Zeissler at once tried to secure a new trial but were refused. An appeal was then made to the Supreme Court of Illinois, without avail. But another appeal had not been made in vain — that to the workers all over the word. Whether partisans of the anarchist movement or not, universal sympathy was awakened, and these men were no longer regarded as criminals, but as martyrs for the cause of labour and liberty.

From all countries came petitions to the governor of Illinois to use his power of grace. "Public opinion" in Chicago was turning round. In the beginning of November the police made a "discovery". In Lingg's cell four bombs were "found". "Public opinion" still hesitated. November 10th a bomb exploded — in the mouth of Lingg. November 11th Spies, Fischer, Parsons and Engel were hanged, Fielden and Schwab had their sentences commuted to imprisonment for life. The four men walked to the scaffold calmly and without regret. The last words heard were Parsons': "Let the voice of the people be heard!"

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