

# **Lucy Parsons: “More Dangerous Than a Thousand Rioters”**

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The strongest argument that can be made as to why all radical activists should study the life and works of Lucy Parsons is that the FBI wants you to know nothing about her.

Lucy Eldine Gonzalez Parsons died in 1942, at the age of 89, in a house-fire in Chicago — the city in which she lived most of her life. The ashes had hardly cooled before the Chicago police raided the remains of her home, confiscated all 3,000 volumes of literature and writings on “sex, socialism, and anarchy,” which constituted her personal library, and turned it over to the FBI. Tragically, and despite her comrades’ repeated inquiries, this treasure trove of revolutionary material was never again to see the light of day.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, the Chicago police had ample reason to want to bury Parsons’ legacy as quickly as possible. In their own words, she was “more dangerous than a thousand rioters.” For virtually the entirety of the last 40 years of her life, the Chicago police tried to bar her from making any public speeches, and routinely arrested her for the ‘crime’ of handing out revolutionary pamphlets on the street. Famed labor historian Studs Terkel even noted how rare of a privilege it was to hear Parsons address a large audience in her later years, owing to the constant police harassment.

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<sup>1</sup> Carolyn Ashbaugh, *Lucy Parsons: American Revolutionary* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Company, 1976), 266. Frank Beck, *Hobohemia: Emma Goldman, Lucy Parsons, Ben Reitman & other agitators & outsiders in 1920s/30s Chicago* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Company, 2000), 79.

# Overlooked by History

Partially because so much of her own writings were ‘disappeared’ by the government, and partially because she was a revolutionary woman of color speaking out against the injustices of a capitalist society run by white men, Lucy Parsons is one of the least known of the major figures in the history of revolutionary socialism in the U.S. Much like her long-time comrades and friends, Eugene Debs, William “Big Bill” Haywood, and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Lucy Parsons made a tremendous contribution to the birth of America’s turn-of-the-century, revolutionary working-class movement; a movement which continues to this day to shape the character of class struggle and revolutionary politics in this country.

Historian Robin Kelley argues that Lucy Parsons was not only “the most prominent black woman radical of the late nineteenth century,” but was also “one of the brightest lights in the history of revolutionary socialism.”<sup>1</sup> Historian John McClendon writes that she is notable for being the “first black activist to associate with the revolutionary left in America.”<sup>2</sup>

More often than not, however, if Lucy Parsons is mentioned as an historical figure, she is noted merely as the “wife of Albert Parsons,” a man who had gained international notoriety after he was executed in 1887 by the state of Illinois for his revolutionary activities.

Unfortunately, this slight extends beyond solely ‘mainstream’ historians, including supposedly left-wing intellectuals as well. For instance, in the 1960s, the feminist editors of Radcliffe College’s three-volume work, *Notable American Women*, decided to leave Parsons out of their study on the grounds that she was “largely propelled by her husband’s fate” and was a “pathetic figure, living in the past and crying injustice” after her husband’s execution.<sup>3</sup>

Even contemporaries of Lucy Parsons, such as the popular anarchist-feminist Emma Goldman (with whom Lucy Parsons became a life-long political opponent), accused Parsons of being an otherwise unimportant opportunist who simply rode upon the cape of her husband’s martyrdom, describing her as nothing more than one of those wives of “anarchists who marry women who are millions of miles removed from their ideas.”<sup>4</sup>

None of this, however, is to diminish the historical importance of Albert Parsons and the events leading up to his execution; and while it is true that Lucy Parsons spent much of her life addressing the crime that was her husband’s murder at the hands of the capitalist state, nonetheless, her political activity and impact on history extend far beyond the scope of that single tragedy. In fact, the work that she lent her energies to in the years following Albert’s execution are of equal (if not greater) importance than anything he had been able to add to the fight for workers’ emancipation in the course of a life that was sadly cut short.

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<sup>1</sup> Robin D.G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), 41–42.

<sup>2</sup> John McClendon III, “Lucy Parsons (1853–1942) Anarchist, socialist, communist, journalist, poet” in Jessie Carnie Smith, ed., *Notable Black American Women*, Book II (New York: Gale Research, 1996), 514–516.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Ashbaugh, *Lucy Parsons*, 6.

<sup>4</sup> Candace Falk, *Anarchy, Love, and Emma Goldman* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1984), 66. Emma Goldman, “Letter to Alexander Berkman,” 1932, quoted in Ashbaugh, *Lucy Parsons*, 256.

## “Whose Lucy Parsons?”

In one sense, Lucy Parsons defies easy political categorization. Throughout her life she referred to herself alternatively (and sometimes all at once) as an anarchist, socialist, communist, and syndicalist. She worked with socialist groups in the 1870s and anarchist groups in the 1880s. She was part of the founding of the Socialist Party in the 1890s and the revolutionary-syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World in the early 1900s. Finally, the last two decades of her life would see her working with the Communist Party.

The fact that she allowed her ideas on revolution and revolutionary organization to adapt so much over the years have led some present-day activists to feel the need to “rescue” her in order to firmly place her under the banner of their particular ideology to the exclusion of all others. For instance, the anarchist author Gale Ahrens, in the Introduction to her otherwise useful collection of Lucy Parsons’ writings and speeches, waxes near apoplectic at the thought that anyone would consider Lucy Parsons a communist. The origin of her ire is the only existing biography of Lucy Parsons, written by Carolyn Ashbaugh, in which Ashbaugh concludes that Lucy Parsons officially joined the Communist Party in 1939.

Despite the fact that this conclusion is backed up by several interviews conducted by Ashbaugh with contemporaries of Lucy Parsons (both friend and foe), and Lucy Parsons’ own words, which reveal the fact that by the 1930s she was publicly referring to herself as “connected with” the Communist Party, Ahrens feels the need to take pains to attack what, in her words, is an “unlikely image of Lucy Parsons as Communist — or worse, as *The Anarchist Who Became a Communist*.”<sup>1</sup>

Clearly for Ahrens there is nothing worse than an anarchist becoming a communist. However, the actual writings and actions of Lucy Parsons herself reveal that this aversion to communism is wholly that of Ahrens, and is not something that Parsons shared in the least.

As one anarchist writer has correctly pointed out regarding those, like Ahrens, who would attempt to declare that Lucy Parsons was one thing by simply lopping off those pieces of her life that indicate she was also something else, “Gale Ahrens’ documentary history was an attempt to rescue Parsons ‘for the anarchist movement.’ In doing so Ahrens provides anarchism with another hero but does little to demystify Parsons’ legacy. Indeed, the real question is not whose hero Lucy Parsons is, but how we can learn from her struggle and how her history can provide a better understanding of American radicalism.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> (Also see endnote 99 in this article). Lucy Parsons was one of the featured speakers at a May Day rally, organized by the Communist Party in 1930, where she said, “I have seen many movements come and go. I belonged to all of those movements. I was a delegate that organized the Industrial Workers of the World. I carried a card in the old Socialist Party. And now I am today connected with the Communists.” Lucy Parsons, “May Day Speech,” Chicago, 1 May 1930, in Gale Ahrens, ed., *Freedom, Equality & Solidarity: Writings & Speeches, 1878–1937* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Publishing, 2003), 156. Gale Ahrens, “Lucy Parsons: Mystery Revolutionist, More Dangerous Than a Thousand Rioters,” in *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>2</sup> Casey Williams, “**Whose Lucy Parsons? The mythologizing and re-appropriation of a radical hero,**” *Anarcho-Syndicalist Review*, Number 47, Summer 2007.

Perhaps the most egregious example of this type of pick-and-choose approach to Lucy Parsons' legacy is the *Lucy Parsons Project* website, which posits itself as a "tribute to Lucy Parsons, her work, and the causes she championed."<sup>3</sup> This would all be well and good if the website actually lived up to its promise. While useful insofar as it provides some of Parsons' own writings and speeches, it unfortunately does her a major disservice by creating a distorted, incomplete picture of what constituted her political life.

While one can find on this website a myriad of writings on anarchism (including those by and about Emma Goldman, who Parsons grew to utterly despise by the end of her life), as well as links to several dozen contemporary anarchist websites, one will not find any writings by or about Karl Marx, anything about the successes of the Russian revolution of 1917, nor links to any contemporary socialist websites (not to mention any specifically anti-racist media), though these were all major, if not defining, contributors to Lucy Parsons' political worldview.

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not note the other side of this trend, which can be seen in erroneous attempts to declare that at no point in Parsons' life did she ever actually espouse anarchist ideas, which Ashbaugh appears wont to do in her biography. This, of course, is plainly not true.

In the end, while people like Emma Goldman considered Lucy Parsons an 'opportunist' for working with different revolutionary organizations and letting her politics evolve over the years, I would argue that this is actually her greatest attribute. Unlike Goldman, Lucy Parsons retained a firm, unwavering commitment throughout her entire life to identifying with, and struggling for, the liberation of working people as a class from the chains of capitalist exploitation, while simultaneously being open to a number of different *forms* in which that liberation might be brought about.

For Lucy Parsons, the aegis under which workers (and by extension, herself) were best able to fight for their social emancipation was not important. If a new type of organization or tactic in the class struggle was developed that seemed an advance over that which preceded it, Parsons did not miss a beat in throwing herself into the work of this new-found creation. Lucy Parsons had only one loyalty — to the downtrodden, oppressed, abused, and exploited. In the end, she measured an organization or an action, not by what label it could be categorized under, but how effective it was in moving this latter group of people into revolutionary action. It is for this reason, and not 'opportunism,' that Lucy Parsons was so quick to latch on to new organizations and ideas that emerged in the course of what she considered to be the great and ongoing war between labor and capital.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.lucyparsonspj.org/>

# Lucy Parsons Becomes a Socialist

Little is known of Lucy Parsons' exact origins, in no small part because she herself was quite circumspect about this matter. Today, most historians agree that Parsons was likely born circa 1853, in Texas, and quite possibly grew up as a slave on a plantation. Documentary evidence suggests that she was of mixed African, Mexican, and Native American heritage. Nonetheless, it's worth noting that she actually denied being of African ancestry, though theories abound as to why she may have claimed this.<sup>1</sup>

She would stay in Texas until 1873, when she and Albert Parsons, who she had married several years before, would move to Chicago. A large part of what inspired this move north was the fear of what the rise of the KKK in the post-Reconstruction South would mean for a progressive-minded, interracial couple like themselves (Albert had been shot in the leg and threatened with lynching in 1872 for his efforts to register black voters).

The Chicago to which the Parsons' fled, was a city undergoing dramatic, if not chaotic changes. The city was fast industrializing and thousands of immigrants were streaming in from around the world, adding to the city's developing proletariat. These workers were savagely exploited and lived in abysmal conditions.

An 1873 investigation conducted on the housing situation in Chicago's immigrant neighborhoods revealed that homes designed for 6 or 7 people often housed 30 or 40. Children played in streets covered in animal litter from the nearby meatpacking plants. Fifty percent of these children never reached the age of five.<sup>2</sup>

It was in one such immigrant neighborhood that the Parsons' first took up residence. Immediately, they were drawn into the radical circles of these European immigrants, learning about the ideas of socialism, class struggle, and revolution, which were rapidly growing amongst the working classes of Europe. Through these circles, the two came to be familiarized with various socialist theorists, including Karl Marx, whose works engrossed them.

Before long, the Parsons' had become leading members in the Chicago branch of the Workingmen's Party (WP), an organization affiliated with, and modeled on, the German Social-Democratic Party (SDP). WP organizing meetings were held at the Parsons' house, and Albert even ran for local office in a WP-sponsored electoral campaign.

More than anything else, the single greatest catalyst of the Parsons' radicalization was the national railroad strike of 1877, the first general strike in U.S. history. Originating in West Virginia as a strike against wage cuts, the strike quickly spread along the rails to Chicago, where every single railroad worker joined in, turning trains over onto the tracks to render them impassable.

As Lucy Parsons would later write of this event, "It was during the great railroad strike of 1877 that I first became interested in what is known as the 'Labor Question'."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Michelle Diane Wright, *Confounding Identity: Exploring the Life and Discourse of Lucy E. Parsons*. Available at <http://works.bepress.com/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1001&context=michelledianewright>.

<sup>2</sup> Jon F. Rice, "Lucy Parsons, Chicago Revolutionary," *People's Tribune*, Volume 22, Number 7, 13 February 1995.

<sup>3</sup> Lucy Parsons, "The Principles of Anarchism," in Ahrens, *Freedom*, 29.

The WP threw itself into the strike, with Albert at one point addressing a rally of 25,000 striking workers.

The capitalist class responded viciously to the labor uprising. In Chicago, the police and the newly-formed Illinois National Guard were mobilized to break the strike with the use of sword, gun, and cannon. Scores of workers were killed and even more wounded. The capitalist press was remorseless in its appraisal of the bloody repression. *The Chicago Tribune* commenting on the working people who joined the strike, opined, “The world owes these classes [of people] rather extermination than a livelihood.”<sup>4</sup>

Despite the brutal defeat suffered by the working class in the course of the strike, the aftermath saw the WP — now renamed the ‘Socialist Labor Party’ (SLP) — grow dramatically.

It was during this period that Lucy Parsons also first became tremendously active in the socialist movement. By 1879, she was pregnant with her first child and working full-time as a dress-maker to support her and Albert, who had been fired and blacklisted from working in the printing trades due to his involvement in the strike.

Despite this, she began writing regular articles for the newspaper of the SLP, *The Socialist*, was a leading figure in organizing housewives and other wageless women into the SLP’s Working Women’s Union, and was one of the first women to join the Knights of Labor once it finally accepted female members in 1879.

Through the pages of *The Socialist*, Lucy addressed the plight of women servants of the rich; wrote tributes to the late Abolitionists who had mortally wounded the Southern “aristocracy” by “striking the shackles from the black slave”; and excoriated the profiteering rich Northerners who grew wealthy during the Civil War, only to spit on the ragged soldiers who later came to them in search of relief from their hunger.

In one article, titled, “On the ‘harmony’ between capital and labor,” Lucy argued that there was no such thing as an identity of interest “twixt the oppressor and the oppressed, twixt the robber and the robbed.”

Let the masses understand that these robbers hold this property (which is so much unpaid labor) under the plea of the laws which they themselves have made ... and further, that these so-called laws would not be worth the paper they are written on, twenty-four hours after the producers of all wealth had willed it otherwise.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Ashbaugh, *Lucy Parsons*, 25.

<sup>5</sup> Lucy Parsons, “On the Harmony Between Capital and Labor,” in Ahrens, *Freedom*, 39–40.



# Reform or Revolution

By the early 1880s, the SLP was undergoing a major internal fight roughly along the lines of a reformist versus revolutionary wing. The SLP, much like the corresponding German SDP, was primarily a reform-oriented organization, which saw socialism as coming about via electoral channels. It viewed the transformation from capitalism to socialism as a peaceful process to be carried out ‘from above,’ by holders of political office, with the class struggle playing an ancillary role, if at all.

In the wake of the violent repression of the 1877 strike, many socialists began to view the notion of a peaceful resolution to the conflict between workers and capitalists as fantasy. For them, the ‘class war’ was no mere phrase, and some actually saw the arming of the working class as an imminent objective. Moreover, these socialists had come to see the electoral road to socialism as a dead-end. The SLP had been making little progress in this vein, and those candidates that did make gains were oftentimes quickly co-opted by local Democratic politicians, jettisoning their socialist platform in the process.

Lucy Parsons had come to stand out as a spokesperson for the more militant faction inside the SLP, fully participating in party debates and conventions. Even the local bourgeois press took note of her, commenting that “she preached the social revolution with even more vehemence than her husband.”<sup>1</sup>

By the end of 1881, the SLP had officially undergone a nationwide split. In Chicago, the revolutionary wing of the SLP, in whose ranks could be counted Albert and Lucy, branded itself the ‘Socialist Revolutionary Club.’ In 1883, the Socialist Revolutionary Club participated in the Congress of North American Socialists, from which Congress issued forth a new national formation, the International Working People’s Association (IWPA).

The IWPA was established on a firmly militant basis, arguing in its Manifesto that, “No ruling class has ever laid down its privileges without a struggle. It becomes, therefore, self-evident that the struggle of the proletariat with the bourgeoisie will be of a violent revolutionary character.”<sup>2</sup>

And while the IWPA adopted a resolution, motivated by the Chicago Revolutionary Socialists, which said that the trade unions “form the advance guard of the coming revolution,” the bulk of the IWPA rather held to the concept of “propaganda of the deed.”

This theory, as propounded at the Congress by the German émigré, Johann Most, centered on the efficacy of property damage, sabotage, and political assassination, as the main catalyst of social revolution.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Ashbaugh, *Lucy Parsons*, 41.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

## Anarchism and State-Socialism

Though the Manifesto of the IWPA did not explicitly mention the word ‘anarchism,’ it nonetheless became the main label associated with the IWPA by both its critics and proponents.

It is also at this time that Lucy Parsons begins referring to herself as an anarchist. She explained that she used to believe the “government could be made an instrument in the hands of the oppressed to alleviate their sufferings. But a closer study of the origin, history and tendency of governments convinced me that this was a mistake. ... that it made no difference what fair promises a political party, out of power, might make to the people in order to secure their confidence, when once securely established in control of the affairs of society.”<sup>1</sup>

She went on to argue that “the struggle for liberty is too great and the few steps we have gained have been at too great a sacrifice, for the great mass of the people ... to consent to turn over to any political party the management of our social and industrial affairs.” Finally, as she concludes, “For these and other reasons, [I] turned from a sincere, earnest, political Socialist to the non-political phase of Socialism — Anarchism.”<sup>2</sup> For Parsons, the ‘political (i.e., electoral) Socialists’ or ‘state-socialists’ were guilty of harboring delusions in the possibility of creating fundamental change simply by capturing state power. And even if possible, this would be undesirable, for nobody but the masses themselves could be trusted to bring about their own emancipation.

Interestingly enough, however, the struggle against the ‘state-socialists’ was not historically unique to anarchism. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels fought bitterly against the state-socialists who dominated the German SDP. The leader of this school of thought in Germany, Ferdinand Lassalle, was also the man whose ideas held sway over the very same Socialist Labor Party in the U.S. that Lucy Parsons had come to criticize.

As Paul D’Amato has accurately summarized,

[I]t was Marx and Engels who organized the fight in the socialist movement against those who believed that socialism was about taking over the state, or that socialism could be equated with state ownership or control of production. ... Marx rejected the politics of the German socialist Ferdinand Lasalle, who viewed the working class as a sort of stage-army that would help him into office where he and his cohorts would implement socialism through the state. Marx attacked Lasalleans for their ‘servile belief in the state.’<sup>3</sup>

Elsewhere, Marx argued against Lassalle’s top-down approach to working-class organization, saying that, especially “where the worker is regulated bureaucratically from childhood onwards,

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<sup>1</sup> Lucy Parsons, “The Principles of Anarchism,” in Ahrens, *Freedom*, 29.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>3</sup> Paul D’Amato, “Anarchism: How Not to Make a Revolution,” *International Socialist Review*, Issue 3, Winter 1997.

where he believes in authority, in those set over him, the main thing is to *teach him to walk for himself*” [emphasis in original].<sup>4</sup>

In fact, it seems quite likely that Lucy Parsons knew of Karl Marx’s fight against the ‘political socialists’ in Germany, for she repeatedly insisted on referring to Marx in her writings as an ‘anarchist’ like herself!<sup>5</sup>

Clearly, the differences between the theories of socialism and anarchism, which to many people today may seem quite clear, were incredibly intermingled in the minds of Lucy Parsons and those around her. As one of her comrades in the IWPA later explained, “A number of persons claim that an anarchist cannot be a socialist, and a socialist not an anarchist. This is wrong. ... The anarchists are divided into two factions; the communistic anarchists and the Proudhon or middle-class anarchists. The ‘International Working People’s Association’ is the representative organization of the communistic anarchists.” In sum, he concludes, “a socialist who is not a state-socialist must necessarily be an anarchist.”<sup>6</sup>

Of course, under such a definition, we would have no choice but to consider Marx an anarchist, too!

Indeed, at one point Albert Parsons responded to a claim that the IWPA was not only anti-Marx, but actually inspired by his political opponent, the Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin, by flatly stating, “The IWPA was not founded by Bakounine ... The IWPA is *not* in opposition to Marx. So far from it that one ‘group’ in this city as elsewhere, is called by his name. The first publication ever issued by the IWPA was written by Marx and Engels in English-German” [emphasis in original].<sup>7</sup>

Elsewhere, Albert said of the IWPA, “We are called Communists, Socialists, or Anarchists. We accept all three of the terms.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Karl Marx, “Letter to Johann Baptist von Schweitzer in Berlin,” London, 13 October 1868, in *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, Volume 43, 132.

<sup>5</sup> Ashbaugh, *Lucy Parsons*, 58.

<sup>6</sup> Speech by Adolph Fischer, in Albert Parsons, *Anarchism: its philosophy and scientific basis as defined by some of its apostles* (Chicago: Mrs. A. R. Parsons, 1887), 78–79.

<sup>7</sup> Albert Parsons, *Knights of Labor*, 11 December 1886, cited in Ashbaugh, *Lucy Parsons*, 58.

<sup>8</sup> Alan Calmer, *Labor Agitator: The Story of Albert R. Parsons* (New York: International Publishers, 1937), 70.

# Class War

Nonetheless, Lucy Parsons was also very much influenced by distinctly anarchist politics during this period. Especially attractive to her was the idea of “propaganda of the deed” and its emphasis on the positive role of political violence.

She considered wage-slavery to be little different than chattel-slavery and so concluded that a similar type of armed conflict would be required to abolish it. In this vein, she supported the efforts to set up armed detachments of the various unions that affiliated with the IWPA. This tactic actually had a degree of appeal amongst some unions, as the 1880s were a time of bloody clashes between workers and armed thugs, called Pinkertons, hired by capitalists to suppress any labor disturbances.

In truth, Lucy Parsons’ tendency to view the class struggle in martial terms is quite understandable if one looks at the rhetoric of the capitalist class of the time, not to mention their behavior during the 1877 strike.

*The Chicago Times*, for instance, editorialized on a group of sailors fighting for an increase in pay:

Hand grenades should be thrown among these union sailors, who are striving to obtain higher wages and less hours. By such treatment they would be taught a valuable lesson, and other strikers could take warning from their fate.<sup>1</sup>

On the topic of the growth in homeless people begging for food in the streets, *The Chicago Tribune* opined:

When a tramp asks you for bread, put strychnine or arsenic on it and he will not trouble you any more, and others will keep out of the neighborhood.<sup>2</sup>

It was in response to such depravity that Lucy Parsons penned one of her most famous articles, entitled, “To Tramps, the Unemployed, the Disinherited, and Miserable,” which was published in the first edition of the newspaper started by her and Albert in Chicago, *The Alarm*, in 1884, and later reprinted *as a pamphlet* by the IWPA.

Parsons addressed her call-to-arms to the “35,000 now tramping the streets of this great city, with hands in pockets, gazing listlessly about you at the evidence of wealth and pleasure of which you own no part, not sufficient even to purchase yourself a bit of food with which to appease the pangs of hunger now gnawing at your vitals.”

Have you not worked hard all your life, since you were old enough for your labor to be of use in the production of wealth? Have you not toiled long, hard and laboriously

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Ashbaugh, *Lucy Parsons*, 57.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

in producing wealth? And in all those years of drudgery do you not know you have produced thousands upon thousands of dollar's worth of wealth, which you did not then, do not now, and unless you ACT, never will, own any part in?

... And that at last when the caprice of your employer saw fit to create an artificial famine by limiting production, that the fires in the furnace were extinguished, the iron horse to which you had been harnessed was stilled; the factory door locked up, you turned upon the highway a tramp, with hunger in your stomach and rags upon your back?

... Awaken them [the industrial bosses] from their wanton sport at your expense! Send forth your petition and let them read it by the red glare of destruction. Thus when you cast "one long lingering look behind" you can be assured that you have spoken to these robbers in the only language which they have ever been able to understand, for they have never yet deigned to notice any petition from their slaves that they were not *compelled* to read by the red glare bursting from the cannon's mouths, or that was not handed to them upon the point of the sword.<sup>3</sup>

The titles of some of her other articles written for *The Alarm* in 1885, such as, "Dynamite! The Only Voice the Oppressors of the People Can Understand!" and, "Our Civilization: Is It Worth Saving?" convey the unmitigated contempt in which she held the ruling class.

In May of 1885, soldiers killed two striking workers at a Chicago quarry. The IWPA held a meeting in response to the slayings in which another of Parsons' most famous statements was recorded by *The Chicago Tribune*:

Let every dirty, lousy tramp arm himself with a revolver or knife and lay in wait on the steps of the palaces of the rich and stab or shoot their owners as they come out. Let us kill them without mercy, and let it be a war of extermination and without pity. Let us devastate the avenues where the wealthy live as [General] Sheridan devastated the beautiful valley of the Shenandoah.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Lucy Parsons, "To Tramps, the Unemployed, the Disinherited, and Miserable," *The Alarm*, 4 October 1884. Available at [http://www.lucyparsonspj.org/writings/to\\_tramps.html](http://www.lucyparsonspj.org/writings/to_tramps.html).

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Ashbaugh, *Lucy Parsons*, 60. The last sentence is in reference to the Union Army General Philip Sheridan whose 'scorched earth' approach to the South during the Civil War is credited with playing a key role in tipping the balance in favor of the North.

# Lucy Parsons on Oppression

The more Lucy Parsons involved herself in the revolutionary movement, the more popular she became. She began regularly addressing crowds numbering in the thousands on the streets of Chicago. The press compared her to John Brown and Louise Michel, the “red virgin” of the Paris Commune, who had died fighting to defend the first ever worker-run society in 1871. Lucy Parsons relished the comparison and was prepared to die a martyr, just as the Communards had done.

Her reputation quickly spread beyond Chicago. One reporter from Canton, Ohio, wrote of her, “She is a wonderfully strong writer and it is said she can excel her husband in making a fiery speech.”<sup>1</sup>

She also became virtually the sole revolutionary in the IWPA (or the SLP, for that matter) to seriously take up the “Negro Question” as it was called then. In the spring of 1886, 13 black people were massacred by a white mob in Mississippi as retribution for one of the black men filing assault charges against a local police officer.

In response to this atrocity Parsons wrote:

Who ... could help but stand aghast and heave a sigh and perchance drop a tear as they read the graphic account flashed to us of the awful massacre of the poor and defenseless wage-slaves ... in the state of Mississippi? Defenseless, poverty-stricken, hemmed about by their deadly enemies; victims not only of their misfortunes, but to deep-seated, blind, relentless prejudice, these our fellow-beings are murdered without quarter.

She continues:

Are there any so stupid as 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.

And as to what recourse Southern blacks had to fight this tyranny:

[T]o the Negro himself we would say your deliverance lies mainly in your own hands. You sow but another reaps. You till the soil but for another to enjoy. The overseer’s whip is now fully supplanted by the lash of hunger! And the auction block by the chain-gang and convict cell!

... But your course in the future, if you value real freedom, is to leave politics to the politician, and prayer to those who can show wherein it has done them more

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 63.

good than it has ever done for you, and join hands with those who are striving for economic freedom.

... As to those local, periodical, damnable massacres to which you are at all times liable, these you must revenge in your own way. You are not absolutely defenseless. For the torch of the incendiary, which has been known to show murderers and tyrants the danger line, beyond which they may not venture with impunity, cannot be wrested from you.<sup>2</sup>

Some critics have taken this article as an example of what they call Parsons' "class reductionism" in approaching the question of racism.<sup>3</sup> Ashbaugh writes that Parsons was "erroneous" in her belief that "all social ills stemmed from economic oppression"; that "the abolition of capitalism would automatically produce racial and sexual equality"; and that "Lucy Parsons did not see that racism and sexism have histories and existences independent of the economic structure of society."<sup>4</sup>

While Lucy Parsons indisputably saw social oppression as a function of the broader economic system in which it operated, it would nonetheless be incorrect to assert that she believed there was no need to wage particular fights against particular forms of oppression, outside of the purely industrial sphere of relations, simply because the abolition of capitalism would "automatically" obviate the need for such fights.

As Ashbaugh well knows, and as we shall see later in Lucy Parsons' political career, she repeatedly, and throughout her life, addressed the specific oppressions faced by women, black people, immigrants, and others, in her articles, speeches, and organizing. She campaigned against lynchings and the racist criminal justice system. She fought for women's suffrage, equal pay, birth control access, abortion rights, the right to easily divorce and remarry, and to be free from rape.

In 1892, Parsons wrote about a meeting she attended in Chicago organized by local black activists to "protest against the outrages being perpetrated in the South upon peaceful citizens simply because they are Negroes."

Never since the days of the Spartan Helots has history recorded such brutality as has been ever since the war and is now being perpetrated upon the Negro in the South.

Women are stripped to the skin in the presence of leering, white-skinned, black-hearted brutes and lashed into insensibility and strangled to death from the limbs of trees. A girl child of fifteen years was lynched recently by these brutal bullies. Where has justice fled?

The whites of the South are not only sowing the wind which they will reap in the whirlwind, but the flame which they will reap in the conflagration.<sup>5</sup>

Further, to truly understand the significance of Lucy Parsons' forthright condemnation of the scourge of racism, one has to look at the context in which she was operating.

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<sup>2</sup> Lucy Parsons, "The Negro," *The Alarm*, 3 April 1886, in Ahrens, *Freedom*, 54–56.

<sup>3</sup> Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 42.

<sup>4</sup> Ashbaugh, *Lucy Parsons*, 66.

<sup>5</sup> Lucy Parsons, "Southern Lynchings," *Freedom*, April 1892, in Ahrens, *Freedom*, 70.

Lucy Parsons was in an extreme minority amongst even most black leaders in the 1890s, who far from advocating armed self-defense, were rather supporting the efforts of Booker T. Washington, whose accommodationist approach to white racism was at the height of its popularity.

And within the ranks of the labor and revolutionary movements, the prevailing notions on racism ranged from the indifferent to the downright odious. For instance, Dyer Lum, the personal secretary to Samuel Gompers, President of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), was an extreme racist whose bigotry was nonchalantly accepted by all those around him. Lum, whose path Parsons routinely crossed in the course of various labor organizing efforts, once commented on the news of a Southern black man who had been burned at the stake, "I would have carried wood myself if I had been there. [T]o shoot him would only have made a county sensation. Burning him made the flesh of every nigger brute in the South to creep."<sup>6</sup>

A similar accusation of "class reductionism" is often leveled against Parsons for her position on women's oppression, which she argued was a function of woman's economic dependence on man, first as his "household drudge" and second as a lesser-paid worker.

Parsons' theoretical approach to the oppression of women was greatly influenced by the writings of August Bebel, the German socialist and close friend of Frederick Engels.<sup>7</sup> Bebel's book, *Women and Socialism*, written in 1879, was one of the first instances of a socialist or anarchist attempting a serious, class analysis of the origins and basis of women's oppression.

In a 1905 article, which drew heavily on Bebel's ideas, Parsons expounded upon her view on this question:

[A]s man ascended in the social scale of development, he began to acquire property, which he wished to transmit along with his name to his offspring — then woman became his household drudge.

She was regarded as a sort of necessary evil; as something to be used and abused; to be bought and sold — as a thing fit only to cater to his pleasures and his passions — this was woman's lowly position. For countless centuries, the drudge went her lonesome, weary way, bore the children — and man's abuse.

However, she goes on to explain that the development of industry and the entrance of women into the ranks of the proletariat "was to bring relief at last. This enabled woman to leave the narrow confines of the kitchen where she had been kept for so long. She entered the arena of life's activities, to make her way in this hustling, pushing, busy world as an independent human being for the first time in the world's history."

She ends by cautioning: "But woman is allowing herself to be used to reduce the standard of life by working for lower wages than those demanded by men; this she will have to rectify, else her labor will become a detriment instead of a blessing or help either to herself or her fellow workers."<sup>8</sup>

Elsewhere she sounded a similar theme, saying,

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Ashbaugh, *Lucy Parsons*, 187.

<sup>7</sup> See Lucy Parsons, "Speech at the Founding Convention of the Industrial Workers of the World," 29 June 1905, in Ahrens, *Freedom*, 79.

<sup>8</sup> Lucy Parsons, "Woman: Her Evolutionary Development," *The Liberator*, 10 September 1905, in Ahrens, *Freedom*, 93.



We, the women of this country, have no ballot even if we wished to use it ... but we have our labor. We are exploited more ruthlessly than men. Wherever wages are to be 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.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, on the immense capacity of women to play a key role in the process of social change, she wrote, “When the women take hold of a great and crying evil, you may expect revolution — not necessarily a revolution of blood and destruction, yet not necessarily one of peace.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Lucy Parsons, “Speech at the Founding Convention,” in Ahrens, *Freedom*, 79.

<sup>10</sup> Ashbaugh, *Lucy Parsons*, 105.

# The Haymarket Affair

The trial and execution of Albert Parsons in 1887 would have a tremendous impact on Lucy Parsons' life and politics. For years prior to that fatal day, the capitalist class of Chicago wanted nothing more than a convenient excuse to be rid of Albert and his cohorts, and in 1886, an event occurred that provided just such an excuse.

May 1<sup>st</sup>, 1886, had been set as a date by the labor movement for a crescendo of activity to what had developed into a vibrant movement for the 8-hour workday. The average worker at the time spent 10–12 hours a day laboring in factories, mines, and mills. The IWPA, which had come to play a leading role in the 8-hour movement, raised the slogan, “For an eight-hour day with no reduction in pay!”

The 8-hour movement in Chicago had come to take on a truly “mass” character, with hundreds of unions and thousands of workers participating in the reform struggle. Albert worked furiously, agitating among working people to participate in the May 1<sup>st</sup> call for a general strike. Lucy, for her part, focused on organizing for the strike-call amongst sewing women and Knights of Labor locals.

When the day arrived, it was estimated that 250,000 workers had gone on strike nationwide, while Albert, Lucy, and the IWPA led a march of 80,000 through the streets of Chicago. The day ended peacefully and successfully, as the city conceded to the 8-hour day for all city employees, with other private employers following suit.

However, two days later, at the local McCormick machinery plant, police fired on striking workers, killing six. The following evening, May 4<sup>th</sup>, the IWPA called for a meeting at Haymarket Square to discuss the murders. Albert spoke at the meeting, but had left the Square well before the police had decided to march on the meeting and order everyone present to disperse. A short exchange occurred between the Police Captain and Samuel Fielden of the IWPA.

Suddenly, a bomb exploded at the edge of the police line, killing one police officer and several workers. The capitalist class and the police spent the next 48-hours carrying out a veritable reign of terror against anyone in the city who had ever expressed sympathy with Chicago's revolutionary movement.

Virtually every known socialist and anarchist was arrested and roughed up. The police smashed the presses of all radical publications. Throughout the day of May 5<sup>th</sup>, Lucy Parsons was arrested and interrogated by police on three separate occasions. They were looking for information on the whereabouts of Albert who had temporarily fled the state, fearing the worst.

The state finally settled on 8 leaders of the IWPA, including Albert Parsons, who they charged with conspiracy to commit murder. Allegedly, Lucy Parsons was spared by the prosecutor for the sole reason that it was deemed less likely that a jury would return a sentence of death if a woman were among the defendants.

The “Haymarket 8” were never charged with actually creating, throwing, or even plotting to throw, the bomb. As the prosecutor said in court, “Anarchy is on trial! These men have been selected, picked out by the grand jury and indicted because they were leaders. They are no more

guilty than the thousands who follow them. Gentlemen of the jury; convict these men, make examples of them, hang them and you save our institutions, our society.”<sup>1</sup>

The “Haymarket 8” were summarily convicted, with four of the eight ultimately facing execution. Albert was one of those four. The execution date was eventually set for November 11<sup>th</sup>, 1887.

As soon as the charges were brought against her eight comrades, Lucy Parsons immediately set about organizing a defense campaign. She sent circulars to every section of the IWPA alerting them to the crisis and asking for donations. She also began what would turn into a non-stop, national speaking tour, which would bring her through 17 different states, where she made approximately 50 speeches in front of close to 200,000 people.

She saw the tour as more than simply a campaign to free her husband and comrades. She intended to use the tour as a means to bring the idea of workers’ revolution to as wide an audience as possible, making the most of the fact that the case of the “Haymarket 8” had become national headline news. She spoke at college campuses, union halls, women’s clubs, and relished the opportunity to expound upon radical philosophies on a national stage.

In fact, Lucy and Albert were to a certain extent ambivalent about the actual execution itself. Still under the influence of the “propaganda of the deed” concept, the two became convinced that the plain injustice at the root of Albert’s pending martyrdom would usher in a mass uprising leading to the social revolution.

She told a Yale audience at one of her stops, “My husband may die ‘at the stake’, but his death will only help the cause ... as it is a necessary thing in the early stages of any great reform that there be some martyrs ...”<sup>2</sup>

To Albert she confided, “I now go forth to take your place. I will herald abroad to the American people the foul murder ordered here today at the behest of monopoly. I, too, expect to mount the scaffold. I am ready.”<sup>3</sup>

Others in the defense campaign pleaded with her to tone down her rhetoric, saying that her violent speeches were not helping the cause. She was unmoved.

One reporter who interviewed her found her a “self-possessed and fluent” speaker, whose “socialist harangues are the most violent and vindictive of all the orators of that persuasion.” She told the reporter that her “religion” was to run the machine that will guillotine capitalists.<sup>4</sup>

At a speech in Kansas City she pulled absolutely no punches, declaring that the death of the policeman as a result of the explosion was the fault of the police alone, for they had no right to march on the Haymarket meeting and order its dispersal in the first place.

Had I been there, had I seen those murderous police approach, had I heard that insolent command to disperse, had I heard Fielden say, ‘Captain, this is a peaceable meeting,’ had I seen the liberties of my countrymen trodden under foot, I would have flung the bomb myself. I would have violated no law, but would have upheld the constitution.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

I do not stand here to gloat over the murder of those policemen. I despise murder. But when a ball from the revolver of a policeman kills it is as much murder as when death results from a bomb.

She related how the prosecution had lined the walls of the courtroom with red and black flags as a way to whip up an anti-anarchist and anti-socialist hysteria within the jury. To this she retorted:

But the red flag, the horrible red flag, what does that mean? Not that the streets should run with gore, but that the same red blood courses through the veins of the whole human race. It meant the brotherhood of man. When the red flag floats over the world the idle shall be called to work. There will be an end of prostitution for women, of slavery for man, of hunger for children.<sup>5</sup>

Lucy Parsons' tour was making quite the stir. "My trip is having its effect," she wrote to Albert in a letter from Connecticut. "The powers that be don't know what to do with me. One New York paper suggests that 'Parsons be let out as a compromise to get Mrs. Parsons to stop talking.'"<sup>6</sup>

One thing is for certain, "the powers that be" were definitely taking notice. During her tour, she routinely arrived at speaking halls to find the doors barred shut. Where she was allowed to speak, police lined the walls and detectives tracked her every move.

While Lucy Parsons may have expected the aftermath of the Haymarket event to see a surge in popular rebellion, quite the opposite proved to be the case. The capitalist class used the post-Haymarket political climate of fear to rescind the 8-hour day where it had been granted. Repression abounded. The labor movement quieted. Membership in the Knights of Labor in Chicago declined from 24,000 to 4,000 between 1886 and 1887. Far from being motivated into action by the bombing and its aftermath, the working class became frightened into inactivity, wholly unprepared to deal with the intensity of the capitalists' swift offensive.

On August 20, 1886, Lucy was able to visit Albert in his prison cell. He handed her a letter, which would be the last words he would ever be able to communicate directly to her.

Our verdict ... cheers the hearts of tyrants throughout the world, and the result will be celebrated by King Capital in its drunken feast of flowing wine from Chicago to St. Petersburg.

There was *no evidence* that any one of the eight doomed men knew of, or advised, or abetted the Haymarket tragedy. But what does that matter? The privileged class *demand*s a victim, and we are offered a sacrifice to appease the hungry yells of an infuriated mob of millionaires ...

You I bequeath to the people, a woman of the people. I have one request to make of you: Commit no rash act to yourself when I am gone, but take up the great cause of Socialism where I am compelled to lay it down [emphasis in original].<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Lucy Parsons, "Kansas City Speech," *The Kansas City Journal*, 21 December 1886. Available at <http://www.blackpast.org/?q=1886-lucy-parsons-i-am-anarchist>.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Ashbaugh, Lucy Parsons, 107.

<sup>7</sup> Albert Parsons, "Letter to Lucy Parsons," Cook County Bastille, Cell Number 29, 20 August 1886, reprinted in Albert and Lucy Parsons, *Life of Albert R. Parsons, with brief history of the labor movement in America* (Chicago: L.E. Parsons, 1889), 211–212.

In the days before the execution, Lucy was a fixed presence out in the Chicago streets, selling pamphlets and making speeches, as crowds of thousands of people gathered around her.

On the morning of that fateful day, November 11<sup>th</sup>, 1887, Lucy Parsons took her two young children to the prison to say goodbye to their father for the last time. But the police, who had created a cordon around the entire facility, refused to grant her entry. Adding insult to injury, they proceeded to arrest her and the two children, throwing them all in a jail cell after stripping them naked. She was kept there until the evening, released only after Albert had long since drawn his final breath.

# Continuing the Fight

After a few short weeks of intense grieving, Lucy Parsons renewed her revolutionary activities with a vengeance. She refused to be cowed by the capitalists' reign of terror, as she was sure they desired. As she would write in retrospect to this whole episode:

Our comrades were not murdered by the state because they had any connection with the bombthrowing, but because they were active in organizing the wage-slaves. The capitalist class didn't want to find the bombthrower; this class foolishly believed that by putting to death the active spirits of the labor movement of the time, it could frighten the working class back to slavery.<sup>1</sup>

Her first major undertaking was to publish a book that Albert had been working on while in jail, titled, *Anarchism: Its philosophy and scientific basis*. Released in December of 1887, the police seized all but the first 300 copies from the printer.

This book is noteworthy, *inter alia*, for epitomizing the extent to which the concepts of anarchism and socialism were inextricably mingled in the minds of Albert and those around him. Replete with "copious extracts from Karl Marx's 'Capital,'" Albert indicates his intent to "delineate the Philosophy and Scientific Basis of the modern Labor movement, known as Anarchism."

In this work he argues:

There are two distinct phases of socialism in the labor movement throughout the world today. One is known as anarchism, without political government or authority; the other is known as state socialism or paternalism, or governmental control of everything.

He continues:

Socialism is a term which covers the whole range of human progress and advancement. Socialism ... I think I have a right to speak of this matter, because I am tried here as a socialist. I am condemned as a socialist, and it has been of socialism that [the Chief Prosecutor, Julius] Grinnell and these men had so much to say, and I think it right to speak before the country, and be heard in my own behalf, at least. If you are going to put me to death, then let the people know what it is for."<sup>2</sup>

This particular approach to the question of socialism and anarchism can be found repeated in Lucy Parsons' next major work, *The life of Albert Parsons: with a brief history of the labor movement in America*, published in 1889.

Included in this work is the text of Albert's final speech before the court, in which he says:

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<sup>1</sup> Lucy Parsons, *The Agitator*, 1 November 1912. Available at [http://www.lucyparsonspj.org/writings/voices\\_of\\_people.html](http://www.lucyparsonspj.org/writings/voices_of_people.html).

<sup>2</sup> Albert Parsons, *Anarchism*, 9, 93.

“I am an anarchist. Now strike! But hear me before you strike! What is socialism, or anarchism? Briefly stated, it is the right of the toilers to the free and equal use of the tools of production, and the right of the producers to their product. That is socialism.”<sup>3</sup>

Much like Lucy Parsons during this period, it is clear from the above works that Albert neither considered himself exclusively an ‘anarchist’ nor ‘socialist’ but rather both, simultaneously.

With the fresh publication of her collection of Albert’s writings, and in light of the recent success of her national speaking tour, Lucy decided to go back on the road in 1888. She embarked on a tour of the Eastern U.S., selling pamphlets and literature, and giving speeches.

Later that year, she traveled to London as a guest of the Socialist League of England. There, she spoke on panels alongside William Morris — a friend of Frederick Engels and one of the founders of modern British socialism — and Peter Kropotkin, the Russian anarchist theoretician.

Back in Chicago, Lucy Parsons continued to face constant harassment by the police, who arrested her whenever they caught her selling pamphlets on the streets, or shut down meeting halls where she was scheduled to speak.

In 1896, at a meeting to commemorate the Haymarket Martyrs, Lucy Parsons rose to address the audience, but was only able to get through two sentences before she was arrested by the police. Even as far away as Newark, New Jersey, the police had it in for Parsons. When she went to address a meeting there in 1890, the police arrested her before she was able to even enter the hall.

Aside from the political harassment Parsons endured as a result of her activism, she also regularly experienced the routine racist and sexist abuses of the criminal justice system. In 1891, she was forced to seek a judicial restraining order against a prominent anarchist she had been living with, after he had become violent with her, destroying her apartment and leaving her with a black eye. The local press was universally merciless in their attacks on Parsons, calling her a ‘whore’ and a liar. Likewise, the Judge reveled in the opportunity to make Parsons squirm, and turned the case into an indictment of her sexuality, accusing her of ‘living in sin’ with a man out of wedlock. The case was quickly dismissed and she was laughed out of court.

Characteristically, Emma Goldman — the supposed sworn-enemy of patriarchy — would later chastise Lucy Parsons for this incident, complaining that Parsons “dragged a man she had been living with into court over a couple pieces of furniture.”<sup>4</sup>

Police repression and public ridicule notwithstanding, Lucy Parsons was incredibly active during the decade following the Haymarket executions. She had become a regular presence on the streets of Chicago, trudging miles through the city in evasion of the police, selling revolutionary pamphlets, books, and newspapers. She walked picket lines with striking workers day in and day out.

Ashbaugh writes, “She was becoming as much a part of Chicago as the Board of Trade or the stockyards. Travelers to Chicago made it a point to see Lucy Parsons, either for inspiration or out of curiosity.”<sup>5</sup>

When the new Governor of Illinois, John Altgeld, organized a series of “Economic Forums” in the early 1890s, in order to discuss possible ‘progressive’ reforms the state could enact, Parsons

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<sup>3</sup> Albert and Lucy Parsons, *Life of Albert R. Parsons*, 161.

<sup>4</sup> Emma Goldman, “Letter to Alexander Berkman,” 1928, quoted in Ashbaugh, *Lucy Parsons*, 179.

<sup>5</sup> Ashbaugh, *Lucy Parsons*, 176.

made sure to intervene. At one such forum on the topic of ‘penal reform,’ which proposed such things as the construction of more spacious prison cells, while leaving the prisons themselves — and the laws that filled them — intact, Parsons blasted the Governor:

Will you deny that your jails are filled with the children of the poor, not the children of the rich? Will you deny that men steal because their bellies are empty? Will you dare to state that any of those lost sisters you speak of enjoy going to bed with ten and twenty miserable men in one night and having their insides burn like they were branded?

She continued over the boos and hisses of the forum’s upper-class attendees:

I will not rise to your reform bait. This is your society Judge Atgeld; you helped to create it, and it is this society that makes the criminal ... And if the workers unite to fight for food, you jail them too ... No, so long as you preserve this system and its ethics, your jails will be full of men and women who choose life to death, and who take life as you force them to take it, through crime.”<sup>6</sup>

Statements such as these, however, should not be taken to indicate that Parsons was against *all* reforms, as some have incorrectly averred.<sup>7</sup> Far from the caricature of Lucy Parsons as a fanatical revolutionary stubbornly opposed to all measures that did not lead to the immediate abolition of the existing order of things, Parsons understood the importance of the fight for reforms as part of the process of building up the consciousness and confidence of the working class towards the goal of revolution.

Looking back on the struggle for the eight-hour day, i.e., to reform the length of the workday, Parsons noted that “the radical element in Chicago were divided as to what position they should take regarding the proposed strike, some taking the position that it was only a palliative at best, that it was not worth such a gigantic struggle as must be engaged in, if it was to succeed.”<sup>8</sup>

To such ‘ultra-left’ concerns she had retorted:

A reduction of the hours of labor to the point where all can have employment is worth a general strike, because upon this point all efforts can be focused, and if carried, its beneficial effects would be felt immediately by the whole working class, men, women, and children.

It would be an object lesson at once demonstrating what united effort can accomplish. Having carried this point of attack, further moves could be instituted for attacks upon the profit-taking class, and gained until the wage system is abolished and a system of cooperation is instituted, the working class preparing themselves in the meantime for a larger liberty.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>7</sup> See Jacob McKean, “A Fury for Justice: Lucy Parsons and the Revolutionary Anarchist Movement in Chicago,” *The Anarchist Library*, 17 October 2006, and Wright, “Confounding Identity,” and Williams, “Whose Lucy Parsons?”

<sup>8</sup> Lucy Parson, “The Eight-Hour Strike of 1886,” *Industrial Worker*, 1 May 1912, in Ahrens, *Freedom*, 138.

<sup>9</sup> Lucy Parsons, “The IWW and the Shorter Workday,” *The Liberator*, 8 April 1906, in Ahrens, *Freedom*, 121.



For Parsons, there was a world of difference between reforms granted from on-high, by a ruling class trying to co-opt and control its subjects, and reforms wrested from the ruling class by a fighting movement from below.

Reforms from above were mere charity, “hush money to hide the blushes of the labor robbers.” But the *struggle* for reforms was crucial if the working-class was going to develop the ability to fight for itself; and without the ability to fight for itself, the working class had nothing.

As Parsons eloquently put it, “He who would be free must himself strike the blow.”<sup>10</sup>

In 1891, Lucy Parsons began editing her own newspaper, *Freedom: A Revolutionary Anarchist-Communist Monthly*. Through the pages of *Freedom*, Parsons spoke out against lynchings and the peonage of black sharecroppers in the South; she covered the major labor struggles of the day, such as the fights at the Carnegie steel mills of Pennsylvania and the silver mines of Idaho; she called attention to the epidemic of rape within marriage, and pointed out that women’s function in the home was often nothing more than that of a servant, “for which she does not get a servant’s wage.”<sup>11</sup>

Nearly a decade removed from the Haymarket executions, Lucy Parsons publicly expressed her hatred for the capitalist class with as much ferocity as ever. At a rare public speaking event in Chicago in 1893, Parsons addressed a crowd of thousands of unemployed people, casualties of the financial crisis of that year.

You are the sole producers; why should you not consume? ... The present social system is rotten from top to bottom. You must see this and realize that the time has come to destroy it.

Let our streets run with gore but let us have justice ... Capitalist lives swept away are so much gain to us ... That is why I am a revolutionist!

You must no longer die and rot in tenement houses ... Shoulder to shoulder with one accord you should rise and take what is yours.<sup>12</sup>

In 1894, she lent her efforts to what would become the first ever mass march on Washington, D.C., organized by the populist, Jacob Coxey. She addressed Coxey’s “Army of the Unemployed” as they gathered on the South Side of Chicago in preparation for their long march to the Capitol in pursuit of federal relief for the jobless.

The year 1894 is also noteworthy as the year that Eugene Debs emerged as a national labor leader in the course of the Pullman railroad strike he helped organize. Debs would end up spending six months in jail for his role in the strike, and would emerge from prison as a self-identified socialist.

Parsons immediately became enamored with Debs, who she called a “new revolutionary leader.” When Debs met with her in Chicago in 1897, she quickly signed on to his plan to found a new socialist organization, the Social Democracy of America, with a platform calling for a shorter workday, jobs for the unemployed, and public ownership of all utilities. Parsons fully endorsed Debs’ vision for this organization and subsequently lent her name to the organization’s ‘re-founding’ in 1901 as the Socialist Party of America.

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Ashbaugh, *Lucy Parsons*, 170.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

Though Parsons was engrossed in issues of domestic reform during this period, it is to her credit that she also took notice of the rise of America as an imperial power on the international stage. In 1898, the U.S. went to war with Spain over control of Cuba and the Philippines. Parsons took to the streets, denouncing the war and discouraging young people from enlisting in the military's adventure.

I appeal to you young men to refuse to enlist and go to those far-off islands for the purpose of riveting the chains of a new slavery on the limbs of the Filipinos ... What will it avail you? Don't you have to fight enough battles against the trusts here, without traveling across the Pacific?<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 207.

## Debates in the Movement

By the turn of the century, socialism was becoming a powerful force within the labor movement. In 1893, the AFL national convention passed a floor resolution calling for “the collective ownership by the people of all the means of production and distribution.” In 1902, a member of the Socialist Party lost a bid to unseat the AFL President Samuel Gompers by a vote of 4897 to 4171.

With the socialist movement gaining in significance, the fight between its reformist and revolutionary wings took on a renewed vigor. Once again, Lucy Parsons found herself in the midst of a battle over the character and direction of American socialism.

The reformists were still determined to turn the movement into a purely electoral, peaceful presence within the labor movement and broader society. Parsons, of course, would have no truck with this. In Chicago, she became the reformists’ most fierce opponent.

As early as 1888, at a meeting of Chicago’s Central Labor Union, Parsons stood up to denounce those socialists at the meeting who were voicing support for the Democratic Party as against the Republicans. “Have the Democrats committed no sin?” she shouted. “Have the Republicans been guilty of everything?” She pointed out that the Democratic President, Grover Cleveland, had carried the South using “the most shocking outrages and crimes.”

I have seen the Ku Klux in the South myself. I know something about them, and they were every one of them Democrats. The negroes of the South are no longer in physical slavery, but the Democrats of the South intend to keep them in economic slavery!<sup>1</sup>

In 1889, Lucy Parsons was speaking at a meeting organized jointly by members of the IWPA and the SLP. She was inveighing against racism, and attacking the Church and the State as Siamese twins.

The Christian civilization of Chicago ... permits the heart’s blood of your children to be quaffed in the wine cups of the labor robbers ... Socialism is the only 100-cents-on-the-dollar religion. (Cheers) ... We have heard enough about a paradise behind the moon. We want something now.”

At this point, one of the leaders of the reformist current within the SLP jumped up and started yelling, “I won’t allow Socialism to be imposed upon. Socialism means one thing and anarchy another. ... Mrs. Parsons spoke in this hall last Wednesday night, and she used the word socialist every time she should have used the word anarchist. Mrs. Parsons has no right to call herself a socialist.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John C. Ambler Scrapbooks (the scrapbooks may have been prepared for the Citizens’ Association), v. 90, clipping, Chicago Historical Society, cited in Ashbaugh, *Lucy Parsons*, 159.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Ashbaugh, *Lucy Parsons*, 170–171.

During a subsequent meeting of the SLP, Lucy Parsons was physically thrown out of the hall by the reformists.

At the precise moment that Lucy Parsons' state-socialist opponents were intent on wholly ejecting her from the socialist into the anarchist movement, Parsons was coming into conflict with the recognized leaders of American anarchism.

Lucy Parsons' anarchism was always syndicalist in nature — that is, based on a conception of the labor movement as the main lever of social revolution. She argued that “the trade unions, the Knights of Labor assemblies, etc., are the embryonic groups of the ideal anarchist society.”<sup>3</sup>

Elsewhere, she makes clear that her conception of a future anarchist society would be constructed along the lines of industrial labor. In a strikingly similar vision to that established with the advent of workers' councils, or ‘Soviets,’ as they arose in Russia, first in 1905, and then later in 1917, Parsons speculates:

Each branch of industry will no doubt have its own organization, regulations, leaders, etc.; it will institute methods of direct communication with every member of that industrial branch in the world, and establish equitable relations with all other branches. There would probably be conventions of industry which delegates would attend, and where they would transact such business as was necessary”<sup>4</sup>

In the meantime, the duty of all revolutionaries was to agitate within the existing trade unions in order to fight for their direction and to win over the workers therein to the necessity of revolution.

Such a conception of revolution was a million miles away from the prevailing anarchist ideas of the time. Emma Goldman, the “Queen of the Anarchists” as her friends called her, was the most popular anarchist figure in America by the turn of the century.<sup>5</sup> Her newspaper, *Mother Earth*, was quickly becoming the ‘mainstream’ of intellectual anarchism.

Goldman was not concerned with the trade union movement, nor even with the class struggle, primarily. As Ashbaugh summarizes:

Lucy Parsons and Emma Goldman came from very different social and political backgrounds. Parsons developed in the context of the militant Chicago working class movement of the 1870's and 80's. Goldman developed in the immigrant radical intellectual circles of New York.

Goldman became interested in the freedom of the individual; Parsons remained committed to the freedom of the working class from capitalism.<sup>6</sup>

While Emma Goldman was becoming the spokesperson for the bohemian, ‘free love’ movement, Lucy Parsons was doing speaking tours of AFL locals across the country.

Indeed, one of Parsons' major critiques of Goldman was that she regularly addressed “largely middle-class audiences” and overly-focused on the pursuit of individual, sexual freedom, to the

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<sup>3</sup> Lucy Parsons, “On Anarchy,” in Albert Parsons, *Anarchism*, 110.

<sup>4</sup> Lucy Parsons, “The Principles of Anarchism,” in Ahrens, *Freedom*, 33.

<sup>5</sup> Beck, *Hoboemia*, 51. For more on the life and politics of Emma Goldman, see Lance Selfa, “Emma Goldman: A life of controversy,” *International Socialist Review*, Issue 34, March-April 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Ashbaugh, *Lucy Parson*, 182, 200.

exclusion of pursuing the freedom of the entire working class — both men and women — from the multifarious forms of oppression intrinsic to capitalism.<sup>7</sup>

Parsons became extremely alienated from most anarchist leaders over her row with Goldman. She was attacked as a traitor for criticizing the ‘free love’ movement. These anarchists had pushed the question of ‘free love’ to the center of their politics, declaring that individual liberation, and specifically women’s liberation, could be attained outside of the realm of class struggle, merely by the assertion of one’s right to live as an independent sexual being.

One of Goldman’s associates even went so far as to argue that *only* free love could end the private ownership of one person by another.<sup>8</sup>

Within the mainstream anarchist movement, variety in sexual relations, or ‘free love,’ had become the height of revolutionary activity, and Lucy Parsons endured withering criticisms in the anarchist press for her skepticism.

For Parsons, in contrast to Goldman, women’s oppression was inextricably linked to the economic system of capitalist exploitation. Capitalism stripped most women of their economic, and therefore social, independence. Thus, the fight for women’s liberation must be both economic and social in its content. In other words, women’s slavery could only truly be abolished in the degree to which wage-slavery was also abolished, and vice-versa.

In an article entitled, “Cause of Sex Slavery,” Lucy Parsons responded to those anarchists who attacked her for failing to prioritize the fight to ‘smash monogamy’:

I hold ... that the economic is the first issue to be settled, that it is woman’s economical dependence which makes her enslavement possible ... How many women do you think would submit to marriage slavery if it were not for wage slavery?<sup>9</sup>

Parsons believed that far too many women were “obliged to live with a man whom she does not love, in order to get bread, clothes, and shelter.”<sup>10</sup> Therefore, substantive liberation for women required her economic ascendancy, but as a class, rather than as individuals.

As the attacks on her by Goldman and others continued, Parsons began to question her very identification as an anarchist: “Variety in sex relations and economic freedom have nothing in common. Nor has it anything in common with Anarchism, as I understand Anarchism; if it has then I am not an Anarchist.”<sup>11</sup>

Elsewhere, regarding a comment on ‘free love’ she had come under fire for making at a meeting in 1897, she writes: “If it is necessary to advocate variety to be an Anarchist, then I am not an Anarchist ... I stated further that it made no difference to me what people did in their private lives ... but when they set up their ideas as a reconstructive theory of society, it became public property and I had a right to disagree with them and criticize them.”<sup>12</sup>

While some present-day critics have argued that Parsons’ position in this dispute shows that her thinking on marriage and the family was actually quite traditional and conservative, this argument is not entirely convincing. Parsons had no problem publicly advocating for reproductive

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<sup>7</sup> Falk, *Anarchy*, 66.

<sup>8</sup> Ashbaugh, *Lucy Parsons*, 203.

<sup>9</sup> Lucy Parsons, “Cause of Sex Slavery,” *Firebrand*, 1895, in Ashbaugh, *Lucy Parsons*, 202.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Ashbaugh, *Lucy Parsons*, 222.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 206.

rights, for the organization of sex workers inside the labor movement, for sex education for children, and for the right of women to more easily dissolve a marriage. Furthermore, in the course of her own life, she was in several different romantic relationships of public knowledge, before and after Albert, which were 'out of wedlock.'

In the end, however, it is actually irrelevant what Lucy Parsons' sexual life looked like (or anyone else's, for that matter), and that is really the main point. The obsession of her anarchist detractors with making an individual's sexual lifestyle the central-most important question in the social revolution, merely showed the extent to which they were indeed obsessed with the *individual* pursuit of freedom (and on a "middle-class" basis), to the exclusion of fighting for the freedom of the *entire working class* from the social, economic, and political systems of oppression endemic to capitalism.

Aside from the question of 'free love', Parsons began to grow distanced from the anarchist movement on a whole slew of issues. Soon she would be writing:

The Anarchist cause (there has been no movement in recent years) has lacked a plan of procedure or organization ... The result is that the realization of the anarchistic ideal, grand as it is, is not in the least encouraging ...

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.

Anarchism, as taught in recent years, is too far away from the mental level of the masses.<sup>13</sup>

By the early 1900s, Parsons was also beginning to firmly reject the 'propaganda of the deed' tactic, replacing it with a re-focused attention on the power of the united, mobilized working class.

In 1892, Alexander Berkman, the long-time friend and associate of Emma Goldman, carried out a plot to assassinate the notoriously anti-union steel magnate, Henry Frick. Far from producing the expected workers' uprising, Berkman was detained and beaten senseless by a group of workers before he could flee.

As Ashbaugh writes of Parsons, "She was surprised and disappointed that Berkman's action did not spark the workers to revolutionary action. The incident marked a turning point away from the [propaganda of the deed] in the radical movement."<sup>14</sup>

Several years later, in 1901, a similar plot to assassinate President William McKinley was undertaken by an anarchist claiming to be inspired by Emma Goldman. However, by this time, Parsons responded by saying, "Nothing could be worse for the cause of anarchism. What is the use to strike individuals? That is not true anarchy. Another ruler rises to take his place and no good is accomplished."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Lucy Parsons, "On Anarchist Organization," *The Demonstrator*, 6 November 1907, in Ahrens, *Freedom*, 131.

<sup>14</sup> Ashbaugh, *Lucy Parsons*, 185.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 211.

# The Industrial Workers of the World

By the early 1900s, industrial capitalism was in full-swing. The process to get to that point, however, had been tumultuous. The period leading up to and following the Civil War had seen America just beginning to undergo the transition from an economy based on small, craft-based production, to one based on large-scale industry. This transition entailed the mass pauperization of those pushed out of their craft by the introduction of modern, machine-based manufacturing, with its requirement of a large pool of proletarians bereft of any tools and resources of their own.

For many, including Lucy Parsons, this earlier reality seemed to offer the newly-pauperized laborer, or 'tramp,' no other recourse but to fight against their destitution at the hands of Capital by simply impeding or destroying its progress. Hence, the preoccupation with dynamite.

However, as industrial production became the dominant economic form, and as the concomitant industrial proletariat became increasingly aware of its resultant power, radicals like Parsons began to turn away from desperate attempts to destroy industry, and instead looked to the organization of the working class as the key to *taking over* industry. Industry in the hands of the workers could play a very different role in society than industry in the hands of the capitalist elites.

By 1905, Lucy Parsons was no longer encouraging tramps to see individual violence as their only ally in the fight against capitalism. Rather, she was encouraging them to organize and see their strength in numbers, as united toilers.

In this vein, she participated in the founding of what would become one of the boldest organizations in the history of the revolutionary working-class movement in the U.S.

Linking up with Eugene Debs and fellow veterans of the radical labor movement, Mother Jones and William "Big Bill" Haywood, Parsons helped found the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in 1905.

Despairing of the AFL's narrowly craft-based approach to union organizing, which often pitted workers in the same factory against each other, the proponents of the IWW sought to leverage the power of workers by organizing along industrial lines. The ultimate goal, as stated, was to organize the entire working class into "one big union," which would then take over the running of industry in the interest of the people, rather than for profit.

While she recognized and felt "compelled to give credit to the [AFL] for the great benefit it has been to the working class of America," Lucy Parsons nevertheless felt that the AFL's days were numbered, "first, because of its own inherent rottenness, and second, because it, in common with all other craft organizations, have outgrown their usefulness and must give way to the next step in Evolution, which is the Industrial union, which proposes to organize along industrial lines, the same as capital is organized."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 221.

At the IWW's founding convention, Lucy Parsons was the only woman to address the delegates, which she did from both the floor and the speaker's rostrum.<sup>2</sup> She actually made a point of drawing attention to this incongruity, encouraging the convention to quickly remedy it.

... I have taken the floor because no other woman has responded, and I feel that it would not be out of place for me to say in my poor way a few words about this movement.

I entered here as a delegate to represent that great mass of outraged humanity, my sisters whom I can see in the night when I go out in Chicago ... who are compelled to sell the holy name of womanhood for a night's lodging. I am here to raise my voice with them, and ask you to put forth from this organization a declaration of principles and a constitution that shall give them hope, in the future, that they should be enrolled under the banner of this organization.

Taken together, her speeches at the convention comprise some of her most powerful statements on socialism, revolution, and workers' power. They reveal a tremendous maturation in her perspective on the "Labor Question" over the preceding decades, and actually anticipate important developments that would later arise in the working class movement.

She begins by laying out an internationalist vision for the organization: "We are here as one brotherhood and one sisterhood, as one humanity, with a responsibility to the downtrodden and the oppressed of all humanity, it matters not under what flag or in what country they happened to be born. Let us have that idea of Thomas Paine, that 'The world is my country, and mankind my countrymen.

She exhorts the delegates to eschew all amateurishness in designing the structure of the organization, thus ensuring that it will have the fortitude deserving of a weapon to be wielded by the workers in the course of the class war.

When you go out of this hall, when you have laid aside your enthusiasm, then comes the solid work. Are you going out of here with your minds made up that the class which we call ourselves, revolutionary Socialists so-called — that class, is organized to meet organized capital with the millions at its command? It has many weapons to fight us. First it has money. Then, it has legislative tools. Then, it has armories; and last, it has the gallows... I simply throw these hints out that you young people may become reflective and know what you have to face at the first, and then it will give you strength.

That is the solid foundation that I hope this organization will be built on; that it may be built not like a house upon the sand, that when the waves of adversity come it may go over into the ocean of oblivion; but that it shall be built upon a strong, granite, hard foundation.

She continues:

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<sup>2</sup> Lucy Parsons, "I am An Anarchist." Available at <http://www.blackpast.org/?q=1886-lucy-parsons-i-am-anarchist>. [75] Lucy Parsons, "Speech at the Founding Convention," in Ahrens, *Freedom*, 77–83.



... [W]hat do we mean when we say revolutionary Socialists? We mean the land shall belong to the landless, the tools to the toiler, and the products to the producers. Now, let us analyze that for just a moment. Is there a single land owner in this country ... who will allow you to vote it away from him?

... [The product] belongs to the capitalist class as their legal property. Do you think that they will allow you to vote them away from them by passing a law and saying, 'Be it enacted that on and after a certain day Mr Capitalist shall be dispossessed?' Hence, when you roll under your tongue the expression that you are revolutionists, remember what that word means. It means a revolution that shall turn all these things over where they belong — to the wealth producers.

Now, how shall the wealth producers come into possession of them? I believe that if every man and woman who works ... should decide in their minds that they shall have that which of right belongs to them ... then there is no army that is large enough to overcome you, for you yourselves constitute the army.

She concludes by making an allusion to the worker's uprising then taking place in Russia, "where the red flag has been raised." No doubt drawing inspiration from the Russian workers, she argues:

My conception of the future method of taking possession of this Earth is that of the general strike. The trouble with all the strikes in the past has been this: the workingmen ... strike and go out and starve. My conception of the strike of the future is not to strike and go out and starve, but to strike and remain in and take possession of the necessary property of production. If anyone is to starve ... let it be the capitalist class.[75]

Later that year, Lucy Parsons would begin editing a new periodical in Chicago, which she saw as connected to both the IWW and the Socialist Party. She named it *The Liberator*, in tribute to the anti-slavery campaigner, William Lloyd Garrison, whose newspaper of the same name had played a key role in organizing the Abolitionist movement.

For Parsons, *The Liberator* was more than just a whimsical endeavor. Much like she had once viewed the importance of "propaganda of the deed," she now saw the indispensable role played by "propaganda of the word" (so to speak) in organizing the class struggle.

While there is no direct evidence as to whether Parsons was aware of the now infamous work written by the Russian revolutionary, V.I. Lenin, in 1902, *What Is To Be Done?*, anyone familiar with that work will be struck by the similarity of purpose between the two revolutionaries on the question of a revolutionary newspaper.

Parsons writes:

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 press is the medium through which we exchange ideas, keep abreast of the times, take the gauge of the battle and see how far the class conflict has progressed. It is by the press we educate

the public mind and link the people of most distant parts together in bonds of fraternity and comradeship. We can keep track of the work and accomplishments of our comrades in no other way, except by the medium of the paper.

There was never a time in the history of America when there was such urgent need for radical education as at the present moment. The rich are becoming more oppressive, domineering and arrogant each day; the people more depressed, despoiled and helpless. Every radical should try to reach them and educate them to a correct understanding of their condition in society; tell them why they are exploited, and the remedy. *The Liberator* is trying to perform this task.<sup>3</sup>

“Educate the public mind” is precisely what Lucy Parsons did through the pages of this newspaper. She wrote a weekly column on women’s issues; wrote a series of articles entitled, “Labor’s Long Struggle with Capital,” covering the history of working-class radicalism; and she addressed the fight against racism, xenophobia, and police brutality.

Mostly, she sought to simply lay bare the hypocrisy and barbarism of bourgeois society. In one characteristic article she writes:

The utter irreconcilability of the interest of labor and capital based upon the present system of buying and selling ... should be transparent to any one who gives the matter serious thought.

The one is employed by the other; the laborer wishes to sell his labor at the highest figure possible; the capitalist wishes to buy at the lowest, so the conflict begins. The whole labor problem is brought up when the dispute arises over the share of the product which each of these parties, the workers and the capitalists, are to receive. The competitive system fixes the wages received by the wage class upon the basis of mere subsistence; all over and above this sum, the surplus, goes to the profit-taker.<sup>4</sup>

She also continued to wage the fight against the reformists and ‘ballot-socialists’:

Of all the modern delusions, the ballot has certainly been the greatest. Let us see, for example, how our law factories are operated. A corruptionist works a majority as follows: He hires a tool called an attorney or lobbyist to hang around the capitol and buttonhole the members of the legislature ... In this way, together with some graft, he usually gets the votes of the majority of the members.

With thousands of laws being enacted and hundreds of corruptionists playing their tricks, what becomes of the voter’s victory at the polls? What becomes of his reforming all things by the use of the ballot?

The fact is *money* and not *votes* is what rules the people. And the capitalists no longer care to buy the voters, they simply buy the “servants” after they have been elected to “serve.” The idea that the poor man’s vote amounts to anything is the veriest delusion. The ballot is only the paper veil that hides the tricks.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Lucy Parsons, “The Importance of a Press,” *The Liberator*, 19 April 1906, in Ahrens, *Freedom*, 127.

<sup>4</sup> Lucy Parsons, “The IWW and the Shorter Workday,” in Ahrens, *Freedom*, 120–121.

<sup>5</sup> Lucy Parsons, “The Ballot Humbug,” *The Liberator*, 10 September 1905, in Ahrens, *Freedom*, 95–98.

Or as she put it succinctly in another article, “The trusts will not allow you to vote them out of power because they *are* the power.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Lucy Parsons, “Wage-Slaves vs. Corporations,” *The Liberator*, 24 September 1905, in Ahrens, *Freedom*, 100.

## Building Mass Movements

Lucy Parsons was nearing sixty years of age and suffering from failing eyesight when she helped found the IWW. Nevertheless, she maintained an arduous touring schedule well into the nineteen teens, speaking and organizing across the country, and spending far more time on the road than at home in Chicago (in part because the local police continued to prevent her from securing speaking permits in the city).

In 1910 she went on a national lecture tour of AFL Locals with the explicit goal of trying to radicalize the unionized workers, selling revolutionary books and pamphlets. The next year she joined “Big Bill” Haywood on a circuit of New York City, speaking on the topic of the IWW and the class struggle, and raising funds to support the Mexican revolution then taking place. It was during this time that she began to actually self-identity more as a ‘syndicalist’ than an ‘anarchist’, changing the name of her famous tour speech, “Anarchism: Its Aim & Objects,” to “Syndicalism: Its Aims & Objects.”<sup>1</sup>

In 1913 she traveled to Seattle where, in between organizing to defend a group of 99 socialists who had been arrested for ‘speaking in the street,’ she gave a series of lectures on revolution in which she continued to develop her critiques of the anarchist movement, arguing that the prevailing anarchist theories were “negative, vague, and non-constructive.”<sup>2</sup>

In 1914, Parsons momentarily settled in San Francisco, where she led a campaign to bring relief to those suffering from the economic crash of that year. She helped form an ‘unemployment committee’, and held street rallies and speak-outs, all of which culminated in a massive march of 10,000 people through downtown San Francisco, demanding jobs and relief.

She would expand upon such efforts in a similar campaign she initiated in Chicago in 1917. She organized a series of “Hunger Demonstrations” throughout the city, and specifically focused her agitation amongst the burgeoning numbers coming around Chicago’s Hull House for the unemployed.

At one mass meeting in the Hull House, Lucy Parsons got into a veritable shouting match with the House’s founder, Jane Adams, who had been preaching ‘patience’ to the unemployed in attendance. Parsons stood in the doorway, pointing to the street, yelling, “Come on! March! March! If you want jobs, then make the warehouses of the rich so insecure that through fear they will give you work.”<sup>3</sup>

Such efforts ultimately proved fruitful. Jane Adams, fearing that Lucy Parsons’ more attractive militancy would win the unemployed masses away from the Hull House, was forced to concede, at least in part, to Parsons’ approach. A “Hunger Demonstration” was called for February 12<sup>th</sup>, 1917, to be organized jointly by the Hull House, the Socialist Party, and the AFL, with Lucy Parsons acting as the lead coordinator of the effort. Within two weeks of the mass demonstration,

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<sup>1</sup> Ashbaugh, *Lucy Parsons*, 230.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 234.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

the federal government began implementing a plan to decentralize aid distribution for the hungry and unemployed.

Though Parsons worked with the IWW in one capacity or another for the duration of her life, she nonetheless had serious disagreements with its approach to organizing. As early as 1906, she expressed intense frustration with its overall lack of structure, accountability, and program.

[T]he IWW cannot hope to gain and hold the confidence of the wage class long if it has no definite aim in view looking to a lasting betterment of economic conditions. The Industrial Workers of the World have been organized nearly a year. What have they done worth mentioning? Carried a few isolated, insignificant strikes? What does this amount to? The whole organization seems to be floundering around like a ship lost at sea without a rudder.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps her most important disagreement was over the IWW's 'dual unionism.' The IWW was implacably opposed to the AFL, even to the point of cutting itself off from the vast numbers of workers who were organized in AFL unions. Lucy Parsons argued for a strategy in the IWW, called 'boring from within,' in which the IWW would work with and through existing AFL unions in an attempt to win AFL-organized workers over to a more radical perspective. The IWW rebuffed this strategy.

As Ahrens writes, "Critical though she was of the AFL bureaucrats' conservative policies, she did not want to ignore its million-plus rank and file," and she wished to "introduce radical ideas to audiences that might well have been put off by a blatantly anti-AFL speaker."<sup>5</sup>

To this end, she took the step in 1912 of helping to organize a short-lived break-away group from the IWW, called the Syndicalist League of North America, committed to the 'boring from within' approach. She was allied in this venture with long-time comrades Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, William Z. Foster, and Earl Browder. The Syndicalist League established its headquarters in Lucy Parsons' house in Chicago, and was able to play an active role in a number of strikes before it petered out in 1914.

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<sup>4</sup> Lucy Parsons, "The IWW and the Shorter Workday," in Ahrens, *Freedom*, 121–122.

<sup>5</sup> Ahrens, *Freedom*, 15.

# War and Repression

In July of 1914, war broke out between the world's largest imperial powers. Lucy Parsons, who considered the war a dirty conflict between national capitalists, initially grew very despondent at the rapidity with which the working class seemed to have been caught up in a wave of conservative patriotism at the war's onset. However, her disappointment would reach new heights at the treacherous behavior of the various mass socialist parties within the imperial nations. Every one of these parties, barring the Socialist Parties of the U.S. and Italy, and the Bolshevik Party of Russia, either supported the war or refused to oppose it.

Commenting on the decision of the Social-Democratic Party of Germany — then the largest socialist party in the world — to actively support the war effort, Parsons fumed:

Scientific socialism (so-called) has been taught in Germany for more than fifty years. [Yet] the political representatives of "science" (backed by more than four million voters) helped their imperial master lay a war levy of a billion marks or more for the prosecution of a war on workers of other countries.

And each of the scientists was honored by a clasp of the imperial hand to the tune of "Deutschland Uber Alles!" German scientific Socialism has stifled the revolutionary tendency, once so promising.<sup>1</sup>

Fortunately, the patriotic fervor of the working class was not to last. By February of 1917, Parsons was able to write,

The anti-military spirit which is developing among the masses of Europe will tell the governments of the Earth that the workers have no trouble that needs to be settled by cruel war; and if the rulers have trouble, they can settle them by fighting it out among themselves ... But we are told that kind of talk is unpatriotic, that every man ought to be willing to fight for his country. What country belongs to the wage class?<sup>2</sup>

In April 1917, the U.S. officially entered the war. As is often the case with imperial conflicts, the war abroad was coupled with a war at home. The U.S. Congress quickly passed the Espionage and Sedition Acts to clamp down on all domestic dissent, and unleashed a wave of repression against all revolutionary working-class organizations.

The entire executive committee of the Socialist Party was indicted under the Espionage Act. Eugene Debs would be sent to prison for two years after making an anti-war speech. The IWW may have fared the worst. Despite the fact that the IWW refused to actively oppose the war, the ruling class took advantage of the moment to crush the organization. "Big Bill" Haywood and

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<sup>1</sup> Lucy Parsons, "Just a Few Stray Observations," *Instead of a Magazine*, September 1915, in Ahrens, *Freedom*, 150.

<sup>2</sup> Lucy Parsons, "Workers and War," *The Agitator*, 12 February 1917, in Ahrens, *Freedom*, 151.

one hundred other leaders of the IWW were arrested for committing 10,000 crimes. Mass trials of all known IWW members took place in Kansas and California. Every single state headquarters of the IWW was raided by the FBI. By 1920, with all of its leaders either in jail or exile, the IWW declined precipitously, never to truly recover.

# The Russian Revolution and the Communist Party

The shining beacon of hope for Parsons and many others during this period of war and repression was the Russian revolution of 1917. Led by the Bolshevik Party and V.I. Lenin, the Russian workers had risen up to overthrow the capitalist class. The victorious workers set about reshaping society along the lines of workers' control of production, redistributing the land and tools to the toilers. They established a truly-democratic workers' state, which was based on the network of Soviets that had emerged as the bodies through which the struggling masses had organized the revolution.

Lucy Parsons immediately identified with the revolution. She saw in the efforts of the Russian working class a concretization of what she had spent her entire life working towards. For her, Soviet Russia had become "the land of promise."<sup>1</sup>

In 1921, the left-wing of the Socialist Party and the remnants of the IWW merged to found the American Communist Party (CP), which was roughly modeled on the Bolshevik Party, and sought to lead a workers' revolution in the U.S., just as the Bolsheviks had done in Russia. Most of Lucy Parsons' closest comrades immediately came to play leading roles in the CP, including Gurley Flynn, Haywood, Foster, and Browder. Though not officially a member at this point, Parsons, too, would come to play a leading role in connection with the CP. In 1925, the CP started an organization, the International Labor Defense (ILD), which set for itself the goal of defending the victims of capitalist repression, both in and out of jail, and fighting for the civil rights of the victims of racism.

In 1927, Lucy Parsons was elected to the Executive Committee of the ILD, where she worked side-by-side with Gurley Flynn. In this capacity, she was involved in some of the most important fights of the day. She organized against the executions of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, anarchist labor organizers who were framed for murder; she defended Angelo Herndon, the young African-American Communist, who faced 20 years in prison on a charge of "insurrection" for trying to organize black industrial workers in Georgia; she fought to prevent the execution of Tom Mooney, her long-time friend and a leader in both the Socialist Party and the IWW, who had also been framed for murder.

Finally, she actively participated in the famous campaign to free the "Scottsboro Boys" — nine young African American men in Alabama who were falsely accused of rape, convicted by an all-white jury, constantly threatened with lynching by white mobs, and who ultimately became national symbols of criminal injustice in the segregated South. The victorious campaign to win their freedom would become one of the most recognized successes of the ILD and the CP. Notably, it was through this work with the ILD that Lucy Parsons would make her first return to the South in over fifty years.

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<sup>1</sup> Lucy Parsons, "Foreword," 24 September 1937, in Calmer, *Labor Agitator*, 5.



In a revealing letter written to a friend, Parsons looks back on what it was that attracted her to the ILD in light of her frustrations with anarchism:

Anarchism has not produced any organized ability in the present generation, only a few little loose, struggling groups, scattered over this vast country, that come together in 'conferences' occasionally, talk to each other, then go home.

Anarchists are good at showing the shortcomings of others' organizations. But what have they done in the last fifty years ... Nothing to build up a movement; they are mere pipe-dreamers dreaming. Consequently, Anarchism doesn't appeal to the public ... [It] is a dead issue in American life today.

I went to work for the International Labor 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."<sup>2</sup>

With events in Russian providing a concrete example of the possibility of workers' revolution, Lucy Parsons had no patience for those anarchists leveling abstract criticisms against the realities of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' as embodied in the early years of the Soviet government. It was precisely this issue that would spark the final flare-up in Parsons' long-standing political feud with Emma Goldman.

Though an initial supporter of the Russian revolution while living there in exile in 1920, Goldman had become an outspoken opponent within a few years. The turning point for her was the suppression by the Soviet government of the sailors' mutiny at the Kronstadt naval base in 1921. A group of peasant sailors, calling themselves anarchists, had risen against the workers' government, demanding, among other things, the ouster of the Bolshevik Party, a return to private control of the land and tools, and the right of individuals to privately sell commodities on the free-market.<sup>3</sup>

An in-depth discussion of the Kronstadt affair is beyond the scope of this article, but suffice it to say that Goldman's turnabout on the Russian revolution because of this incident, drew the ire of Lucy Parsons, especially after Goldman accepted payment by various bourgeois newspapers in the U.S. to denounce the Soviet government in their pages.<sup>4</sup>

"Big Bill" Haywood, who considered the Kronstadt sailors to be no better than scabs, describes in a fascinating article in 1922 how Lucy Parsons "severely criticizes Emma Goldman because she sold herself to the capitalist press of the United States. She characterizes the Goldman articles in effect as a rehash of the supercilious vapourings of capitalist reporters."<sup>5</sup>

Parsons writes of Goldman:

I think Russia treated her and Berkman very tolerantly and cleverly; anyone could see that they were doing everything in their power to provoke arrest.

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<sup>2</sup> Lucy Parsons, "U.S. Anarchism in the 1930s," Letter to Carl Nold, 27 February 1934, in Ahrens, *Freedom*, 161.

<sup>3</sup> See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kronstadt\\_rebellion#cite\\_ref-3](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kronstadt_rebellion#cite_ref-3).

<sup>4</sup> For more on Kronstadt, see Chris Harman, "Kronstadt and the Defeat of the Russian Revolution," *International Socialist Review*, Issue 3, Winter 1997, available at <http://www.isreview.org/issues/03/kronstadt.pdf>, and William "Big Bill" Haywood, "An Anarchist on Russia: A Reply to Emma Goldman," *The Communist Review*, Vol. 3, No. 4, August 1922, available at [http://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/sections/britain/periodicals/communist\\_review/1922/04/emma\\_goldman.htm](http://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/sections/britain/periodicals/communist_review/1922/04/emma_goldman.htm).

<sup>5</sup> Haywood, "An Anarchist on Russia," op. cit.

As to the Kronstadt affair, that was war; nothing new about it, and the side that got licked are sour about that, too, nothing new about it either. I wonder what the Anarchists would have done, had they won out? Surrounded as they were by those hostile armies [of the Allied Powers] and enemies on every side?"<sup>6</sup>

In an interview she gave around that time, she goes so far as to say of Goldman, "We had been friends for more than thirty years, but when she began publishing articles in the Chicago press attacking the Soviet Union I wrote her that I never wanted to see her again."<sup>7</sup>

For Goldman, this was all just another instance of Lucy Parsons being the opportunist who "goes around with every group proclaiming itself revolutionary, the IWW, now the communists."<sup>8</sup>

Despite aforementioned contentions to the contrary, it is clear that the final years of Lucy Parsons' life were spent working closely with the CP (either as an 'official', card-carrying member or, at the very least, as a devoted 'fellow traveler'). Though Ahrens argues the unlikelihood of Parsons joining a party as bureaucratically stifling as the Communist Party of 1939, warped as it was by Stalinism (to be sure, an entirely accurate characterization), this overlooks the extent to which the CP was not only leading the fight against racism and repression during this period, but was also spearheading the unionization of the working class along industrial lines through its work in the newly-formed Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO).

As Ashbaugh argues, "Lucy Parsons had lived to see hundreds of thousands of workers organized into the C.I.O. in auto, steel, meat packing, and other industries. She felt that the Communist Party had led a movement for industrial unionism which compared with the size of the mass movement for the eight hour day which the 'anarchists' had led in 1886."<sup>9</sup>

In a 1930 letter to a friend, Parsons writes of being impressed with the CP's organizing efforts in the context of the Great Depression, commenting, "While I don't belong to the Communist Party, I have been working with them to some extent, as they are the *only* bunch who are making a vigorous protest against the present horrible conditions!" [emphasis in original].<sup>10</sup>

In another letter she writes, "The Communists are very good propagandists; they stir things up. Of course, like all humanity, they, too, have their faults and shortcomings. Society cannot be static, it must either go forward to some kind of state of socialism or backward to slavery."<sup>11</sup>

In an article written for the CP's newspaper, *The Daily Worker*, on the eve of International Worker's Day, May 1<sup>st</sup>, 1930, Parsons writes, "On this day the workers of every land and every clime will abandon the factories, mines and other hell holes of capitalism and march by the thousands under the banner of the Communist International and will declare their intention to abolish the curse of capitalism, poverty, misery."

She continues with a review of the labor movement: "There came to the front the A.F. of L. which has retarded and deadened the labor movement. In a population of 38 million of workers

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<sup>6</sup> Lucy Parsons, "Letter to Carl Nold," 30 May 1932, cited in Ashbaugh, *Lucy Parsons*, 255.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Sender Garlin, "Lucy Parsons Carried Out Bequest of Her Husband, A Hero of American Labor," *The Daily Worker*, 11 March 1942.

<sup>8</sup> *Nowhere at Home*, 170, Emma Goldman to Alexander Berkman, January 1932, cited in Ashbaugh, *Lucy Parsons*, 256.

<sup>9</sup> Ashbaugh, *Lucy Parsons*, 261.

<sup>10</sup> Lucy Parsons to Carl Nold, 25 September 1930, *Labadie Collection at the University of Michigan Library*, cited in Ashbaugh, *Lucy Parsons*, 254.

<sup>11</sup> Lucy Parsons to Comrade Lawson, 12 June 1934, reprinted in Michael Boda, "An unpublished 1934 letter from Lucy Parsons," *Pittsburgh Grassroots Examiner*, 13 October 2009. Available at <http://www.examiner.com/grassroots-in-pittsburgh/an-unpublished-1934-letter-from-lucy-parsons>.

it has gathered some 2 millions of the mechanics and ignored the other 36 millions — virtually told them to go to hell! Now the Communists have risen as a challenge to this bunch of lazy racketeer A.F.L. officials, with their morally bankrupt organization. The Communists are here to stay.”<sup>12</sup>

Finally, in 1937, Parsons took the unambiguous step of collaborating with Alexander Trachtenberg, the head of *International Publishers* — the publishing arm of the CP — in producing a biography of Albert Parson, for which she wrote the Introduction. Her introductory essay is noteworthy for two main reasons. First, after singing the praises of Soviet Russia, she draws a line of continuity between the Haymarket Martyrs and the efforts of the CP. Within this lineage she also explicitly names Debs, Haywood, and Mooney. Second, she highly acclaims the content of the biography without offering any critiques, which is especially striking given that the biography itself is actually a quite wooden and one-dimensional combination of anti-anarchist polemics and an attempt to posit Albert as a sort of inchoate original American Leninist.<sup>13</sup>

The relationship that Parsons developed with Trachtenberg around the publication of this book is actually cited by Ashbaugh as the immediate precipitating factor in Parsons’ decision to finally join the CP in 1939.

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<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Ashbaugh, *Lucy Parsons*, 253.

<sup>13</sup> Lucy Parsons, “Foreword,” 24 September 1937, in Alan Calmer, *Labor Agitator: The Story of Albert R. Parsons* (New York: International Publishers, 1937).

## “She Lived for the Future”

In a poetic twist of history, Lucy Parsons’ last public appearance was in 1941, where she gave a speech to striking workers at the International Harvester machinery plant – the successor to the very same McCormick machinery plant where the deaths of six workers at the hands of the police in 1886 would prompt that fateful meeting in Haymarket Square.

Upon her death, *The Daily Worker* published a series of stirring obituaries honoring the life and legacy of Lucy Parsons.<sup>1</sup> One of these pieces, “Tribute To a Heroine of Labor,” by Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, is arguably the most sublime portrait of Lucy Parsons in existence:

Lucy Parsons spoke in a beautiful melodious voice, with eloquence and passion. She had her roots in the people, which gave her strength. Both of her children died. She kept on alone, without wavering. She never lost faith in the power, courage, intelligence and ultimate triumph of the people. Years ago she accustomed trade union men to listen respectfully to a woman speaking for labor. She helped make them more keenly aware of the need of strong unions and organizing the unorganized. She helped to build up a strong tradition of labor defense so that other leaders of labor should not suffer the same fate as her husband.

When Eugene V. Debs spoke at the 1905 IWW convention, Mother Jones sat on one side of him and Lucy Parsons on the other. Bill Haywood presided. She encouraged every new effort to push forward the whole labor movement. What a great satisfaction to her it must have been for her to realize the number of splendid young women, many of her color, who are enrolled in it today. What a joy to see trades unions millions strong! She did not live in the past. She lived for the future. She will live in the future, in the hearts of the workers.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> One of the key pieces of evidence that Ahrens cites as reason to doubt Lucy Parsons’ membership in the CP is that the *Daily Worker* did not mention this fact in its obituary for her. Ahrens argues that the *Daily Worker* would have emblazoned Parsons’ membership on its masthead if it had been true. However, there are several mitigating factors that potentially explain this seeming omission. First, it is significant in and of itself that the *Daily Worker* published four separate glowing obituaries over a series of days, all of which posited Lucy Parsons as firmly within its tradition; something which is unlikely to have been done for an activist who had been indifferent, let alone hostile, to the CP. Second, by 1942, the CP was well into its ‘Popular Front’ period, in which it was downplaying the presence of the Party in virtually everything it did. Indeed, by this time, the *Daily Worker* was even distancing *itself* from appearing to be a direct organ of the CP. And of course, in 1944, the CP even went so far as to dissolve itself entirely as a political party, in an attempt to further ingratiate itself with the Roosevelt administration. The fact of the matter is that the period in which Parsons died also happens to be the period in which the Party wasn’t *emblazoning* its existence on anything, let alone an obituary for Lucy Parsons.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, “Tribute To a Heroine of Labor,” *The Daily Worker*, 11 March 1942. Available at [https://docs.google.com/viewer?a=v&pid=explorer&chrome=true&srcid=0B2Zdv5hwi\\_o6ODA3MDdiMzYtYzhkNy00Yzc0LTk0NDItZWQxMzU](https://docs.google.com/viewer?a=v&pid=explorer&chrome=true&srcid=0B2Zdv5hwi_o6ODA3MDdiMzYtYzhkNy00Yzc0LTk0NDItZWQxMzU)

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Keith Rosenthal  
Lucy Parsons: "More Dangerous Than a Thousand Rioters"  
September 6, 2011

Retrieved on 27<sup>th</sup> August 2020 from  
<https://joanofmark.blogspot.com/2011/09/lucy-parsons-more-dangerous-than.html>

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