

May Day Massacre — 100 years ago

Simón Radowitzky, Anarchist and Legend

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May 1, 2009

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At May Day protests one hundred years ago today, Argentine police slaughtered 30 workers who were demanding an eight-hour work day and commemorating Chicago's Hay Market massacre. The repression deeply affected a young anarchist named Simón Radowitzky and unleashed a chain of events that would convert the young man into one of Latin America's most famous internationalists. For the next 100 years, Radowitzky's memory has helped fuel militant worker actions.

May 1, 1909. Police kill thirty workers in a South American city. The workers are gunned down and violently beaten during a protest to demand an eight hour work day and remember the Hay Market Martyrs. Argentina's capital, Buenos Aires, was the scene of this massacre targeting the anarchist-labor movement which proliferated throughout the region through the beginning of the 20th century.

One of Argentina's first unions, the anarcho-syndicalist Federacion Obrera Regional Argentina (FORA) organized the May Day protest in 1909, joining workers around the world mobilizing on May 1 to demand the institution of an 8-hour-long workday and commemorate the Chicago martyrs; Parsons, Engel, Spies, Fischer, executed by hanging at the hands of the United States government and Lingg, who committed suicide in his jail cell. Buenos Aires police commissioner, Coronel Ramón L. Falcón, legendary for his anti-anarchist and immigrant tendencies, gave the order to brutally repress the peaceful May Day protest.

Thousands of workers from the FORA began to mobilize in the late afternoon in Plaza Lorea, in front of Congress on May 1, 1909. Shortly before the speakers began, Coronel Falcón ordered police to break up the protest. The squadron mounted on horses, armed with clubs and bullets, attacked the unarmed anarchists. Those who could escape ran to inform of the police repression. A witness of the event, Dardo Cuneo gave the account from a separate socialist May Day act 20 blocks away: "Among those who arrived from Plaza Lorea with the news of the police repression, was a young man ... in his hand he had a blood stained scarf. 'This is the blood of the brothers and sisters who were killed,' he said in his foreign accent. Afterward it was discovered, when a newspaper published his photo, that the young man with a blood stained scarf clenched in his fist was named Simón Radowitzky" (Juan B. Justo, Editorial América Lee, Buenos Aires, 1943).

Simon Radowitzky

Six months later, a young anarchist named Simon Radowitzky took justice into his own hands — organizing a direct action against Coronel Ramon Falcón. He threw a bomb at the Coronel's coach, killing Falcón in the act. We can only assume that Radowitzky was deeply hurt by the bloodshed and deaths at the hands of the police. Knowing that Falcón would order future police repression against workers, Radowitzky wanted to prevent future bloodshed.

Radowitzky, of Russian origin and barely 18-years-old, was sentenced to life in prison in the Siberia of Argentina, Ushuaia. At his trial he admitted to throwing the bomb which killed Falcón. "I killed Colonel Falcón because he ordered the massacre of workers. I am the son of working people and a brother of those who have died fighting the bourgeoisie."

Anarchist historian, Osvaldo Bayer wrote a number of books and articles on Radowitzky, including *Simón Radowitzky, ¿mártir o asesino?*. Anarchists made several attempts for Radowitzky's

release and organized an international campaign to “Free Radowitsky.” Bayer writes that Radowitzky stood up to all humiliations in prison and defended his fellow prisoners who respected Radowitzky as a man jailed for defending his ideals. The campaign for his release continued until he was finally freed in 1930, after 20 years of hell and almost complete isolation. He was expelled from Argentina, taking Uruguay as his new home. When the Spanish Revolution broke out, he headed for Spain in 1936 to join the anarchist division on the Aragon Front. Radowitzky died of a heart attack on February 29, 1956, as a true internationalist in Latin America — far from his birth place Russia.

Simon Radowitzky left a tradition of anarchist-individualist action. After Radowitzky, came the anarchist expropriators, individuals who employed direct, violent means to undermine what they saw as an unjust, corrupt and violent political and economic system. Whether or not these actions were justified can be debated, but it must be taken into consideration the violent attacks that the state and state apparatus has imposed on the oppressed in order to judge whether violence should be used against the state as a method of defense or social revolution.

Tradition of State Violence

Brutal state violence against working class resistance did not begin nor end with the 1909 May Day massacre. The Argentine State implemented a number of measures in fear of growing manifestations of radical activity — particularly anarchism. Ten years after the 1909 massacre, four workers were killed by police in Buenos Aires, Argentina starting “la semana tragic” or the tragic week. On January 7, 1919, military officers used deadly force against striking workers echoing the worldwide demand for an eight hour day and improved wages in the Vesena Iron Workers plant in the capital city. Two days after the start of the tragic week, the FORA mobilized hundreds of thousands of people into the streets. The military, police and company vigilante groups cracked down on the general strike as hundreds of workers were killed and more than 50,000 were arrested during the tragic week. Later in 1921, the Patagonia Rebelde took place, with the mass shooting of over 1,500 rural workers on strike in the southern region of Patagonia.

Argentina would see several military dictatorships after 1909. The most brutal being the 1976–1983 military junta which imposed absolute terror throughout the population. During the nation’s darkest chapter, the dictatorship disappeared more than 30,000 people — students, labor organizers, and activists, victims of the military’s unimaginable methods of terror. The military dictatorship systematized the practice of forced disappearances and torture with U.S. financial support and training. Like the previous massacres throughout the century, the military sought to wipe out political opponents and growing social movements in order to implement an economic model in line with the Washington Consensus. They didn’t want radical organizers who would challenge the accumulation of foreign debt, reliance on foreign investors and foreign corporations’ industrial takeovers.

The military dictatorship successfully implemented a neoliberal order, but they were unable to prevent future movements from trying to undo neoliberalism. State violence and the killing of activists transformed Argentina’s labor movement, but it has not destroyed it which leads us to where we are today.

Historic Memory and Resistance

On May 1, 2009, workers and social movements will return to Plaza Lorea the location of an event that changed the face of working class history and the life of Simon Radowitzky, where he saw his fellow comrades fall victim to police violence a hundred years ago. The utopian dreams of the anarchists of social revolution a century ago have dwindled but hope reigns.

Ramon Falcón has been memorialized with bronze statues and his name given to police academies and streets. During the 70's, military dictatorship named a plaza tucked in a residential neighborhood after Ramon Falcón. In 2003, a neighborhood assembly unofficially changed the name of the Plaza to "Che Guevara," which was decided in a popular vote in which over 10,000 people voted. Falcón's memorial statue located in an upper-class neighborhood in Buenos Aires has been destroyed on a number of occasions. Falcón's memory as an honorable police official can be erased, his memory as a brutal repressor will remain in the historic memory of the oppressed.

This May Day comes as a recession is begins to unfold in Argentina, since October 2008 more than 55,000 people have lost their jobs. During this financial crisis when capitalism is at its weakest, the revolutionary spirit of Simón Radowitzky lives in the struggle of women and men who continue to fight for a better world, a world without exploitation and oppression. Radowitzky is alive in the subway workers who are fighting to form their own union in Buenos Aires subways; the autonomous social movements fighting transnational companies polluting the Andes mountains; the anarchist groups of today; the worker occupied factories where over 10,000 workers are producing without bosses or owners and the many social movement practicing direct democracy and carrying out their own direct actions against capitalism.

¡Que viva Simon Radowitzky y los Mártires de Chicago!

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Retrieved on 27th December 2023 from nacla.org
Originally published by *ZNet*.

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