

Haymarket was a Riot

May Picqueray

May Day 1920 and 1921 were particularly wild. Leaving the Bourse du Travail, the République square and the boulevard de Magenta, horse-riding guards charged us and hit us with the flat of their sabre blades, and one of them slapped me in the face in such a way that I thought my head had flown off. I kept the mark of his sabre on my face for a long time, and I had a swollen and multicoloured eye of the prettiest effect.

I do not speak of those May Days with the nostalgia for past times. Because they were the May Days of my youth.

But I say categorically that these May days were “authentic”.

The Communists had not yet hijacked this day to make it the “celebration” of labour.

I need to restore historical truth:

Chicago, in 1886, was only a city of immigrants, coming from every corner of Europe. It comprised different factories, canning factories, slaughter houses. The lack of hygiene and physical protection, the inhumane work speed, the low wages, the lack of employment security, pushed the workers to organise to defend themselves against the exploitation they were subjected to. Not only in Chicago, but on all the American continent, there was undiluted class struggle. Syndicalism was growing roots in the United States. Not without problems. American workers showed an instinctive distrust for the Socialist ideas imported from Europe. Newspapers written in German, English, or French claimed: “to fight against private property is a right, and even a duty.”

A group of Chicago industrials and bankers asked the mayor to ban these newspapers, and to arrest their directors. The mayor told them:

“We have a police force in our hands, nothing will happen, we do not fear them.”

A couple of days later, however, a grumbling flow of people filled the streets and the red and black flags were flowing above the crowd.

“We are fighting for the eight hour day, for a wage increase, for better working conditions, for the abolition of black lists” we could hear every night when workers left the factories.

There was no right to strike, in the sense that, once the strike was over, the bosses took back who they chose, creating discord among workers. Fights broke out between workers and the police intervened with extreme brutality.

On May 4th, a large meeting was planned in Haymarket, and workers' leaders were supposed to speak there. 6000 strikers from the Mac Cormick factories were already there when the factory's bell struck, and the scabs who had been working came out. The strikers left the meeting and fights broke out between workers.

The police intervened and shot at them: the toll among workers was one dead and six seriously injured by bullets; an indeterminate number of superficial wounds; a few injured on the police side. Haymarket was a long square which could contain up to 20 000 people. August Spies, a typographer for the Arbeiter Zeitung, Fischer, who had left Germany at age 15 and had become a social anarchist, Parsons, an American and director of The Alarm, who had joined the army during the Civil War, at age 13, Fielden, an Englishman who had moved to America in 1868, were supposed to speak, but it started raining and so they moved to a nearby hall to finish the meeting. When they arrived there, Fielden was on the platform, when suddenly a troop of policemen barged in, officers at the front, and gave the order to disperse. The speakers started leaving the platform, when a "round and luminous" object flew into the air and a loud detonation followed.

First there was silence... then the police opened fire on the crowd of workers who were fleeing and screaming. In a few minutes, it was all over. The square was emptied, all that could be heard was the moaning of the wounded. There are 70 injured and one policeman killed.

"The Anarchists inaugurated yesterday evening the rule of chaos. They ambushed the policemen and threw a bomb..." the reactionary press printed. Yet, the workers had not fired and the bomb was thrown from the police ranks.

The workers' leaders: Spies, Fielden, Schwab, Waller, G. Engel, Oscar Neeve, W. Senger and L. Lingg were arrested. Parsons could not be found. Two hundred arrests in a week. An atmosphere of inquisition and xenophobia ruled. Four lawyers offered their help to the accused, despite the threats they received. The jury was chosen from 981 people. In truth, the twelve people finally selected all already had their judgement made.

The judge declared at the start of the audience that it was useless to know who threw the bomb, that all the accused were responsible.

George Engel, 50, declared:

"I was not at the meeting but at home, with my wife, my kids and some friends."

Adolph Fischer acknowledged he had taken part in the meeting; Samuel Fielden was accused of having shouted:

"Here come those ferocious beasts, comrades, do your duty."

But some policemen recognized that he had only said:

"We are peaceful..."

Parsons, who had come for the trial, after fleeing on the day of the meeting, declared:

"I have been on black lists for ten years, have published The Alarm for two years. I fight against workers' poverty..."

Spies, turning to the counsel for the plaintiff:

“My defence is your accusation itself.”

Michel Schwab and Oscar Neeve, who weren't in Haymarket, were also charged with murder. Neeve had said these words:

“The police reaction is inadmissible.”

Louis Lingg was accused of having made the bomb. Witnesses attested he was not at the meeting.

“It is true that I have made bombs”, he said, “but not this one.”

The counsel for the plaintiff repeated twenty times to the jury:

“You must choose between law and anarchy, between good and evil. Your decision will mark history. Your responsibility is huge. Do not let yourselves go to clemency.”

The defence claimed that the accused were on trial for their opinions, in the absence of any proof. The pleas were closed on August 19th.

On the morning of the 20th, a line of police officers blocked the entrance to the courthouse, patrols circulated round the city. The jury were the first to enter the room, then the lawyers and both parties. Then the judges. The judge stood up, and everyone with him.

The verdict: death for all, except for Neeve, 15 years in prison. Whispers were heard in the room. The eight men left the room without a word, with great dignity.

Two minutes later, a great clamour came from the crowd, then clapping. The crowd was scared...

The general opinion was expressed in the press: “The verdict has killed off anarchism in our city. It is a warning for European snakes, Socialists, Communists, Anarchists. The Chicago verdict will at least limit the immigration to our country of organised killers.”

Many letters were sent by US and European celebrities to Governor Oglesby: Walter Besant, Walter Crane, Stafford Brooke, Ford Madox Brown. A large meeting was organised in London with William Morris, Bernard Shaw, Anne Besant, Kropotkin, Stepniak, etc.

The governor suggested:

“The condemned would have to renounce their doctrine.”

“Show them a sign,” the lawyers told their clients.

The condemned welcomed this offer with haughty contempt. They demanded freedom or death.

An extraordinary fact, the 50 most important bankers in the city, who held supreme power in Chicago met up to decide whether the condemned should be pardoned or not. It was not a matter of mercy: “Executions can cause trouble, it is useless to revive the agitation...” Should they pardon these men? Some were in favour, others against.

On the morning of November 10th, the wardens hear an explosion from Lingg's cell. They see blood everywhere, Lingg's face is ripped away. People talk of a bomb. He had used a lozenge of mercury fulminate. Some doctors wished to save Lingg by making him pass as mad. He had preferred death to the asylum. On the wall of his cell, drawn with his blood, this inscription: “Long live anarchy”.

On the same day, Fielden and Schwab were pardoned, their sentence is commuted to a life sentence. The others will be executed.

The scaffold was set up in the night between November 10th and 11th 1887, very close to the prison. On the morning of the 11th, the condemned had their breakfast quietly, writing letters.

At 8.40, a lawyer rushes in: the man responsible for the bomb had been arrested in New York, he demanded the execution to be reported. At 10.15, the governor replied “No!”

At 11.30, the sheriff came to read the sentence to each of the prisoners. They were handcuffed and they were dressed in a white muslin shroud. Fischer helped to put his on. Hoods were placed on the four men’s heads. They then said their final words:

Spies: “One day will come when our silence will be louder than the voices you strangle today!”

Fischer: “Long live anarchy! This is the most beautiful moment in my life!”

Engel: “Long live anarchy!”

Parsons: “Will you let me speak, o Americans? Let me speak, sheriff Matson, let the voice of the people be heard! Let...”

Then nothing.

The funerals were held on Sunday, November 13th. “No signs, no flags, no speeches,” the mayor of Chicago had said. Over 250 000 people were crammed along the path of the coffins; around 15 000 people came in the cemetery. The procession marched in complete silence. Four speakers made speeches, including Black, the lawyer of the condemned.

Five years later, a monument was erected on the graves of the martyrs and Waldheim Cemetery became a place of pilgrimage.

The novelist Henry James, the equivalent to Marcel proust, then wrote he had “felt a sinister world, inferior, anarchic, boiled in its grief, its power and its hatred.”

This sinister world was the working class, then crushed by exploitation. Its roaring revolt, which Americans started to feel, was going to keep growing until it shook the world.

It is from this date that May Day is the day of revolt throughout the world and that it is marked in France (in Cléry, in Fourmies) like everywhere, by violence and blood.

Pétain tried to turn May day into a patronage “celebration”.

And the Communists, whether they like it or not, have borrowed his idea and updated it.

But for the “old ones”, May Day will always be a synonym of demands, struggle, REVOLT.

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