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Emma Goldman

Anarchisms greatest hits No. 3

Patricia McCarthy

1996

Emma Goldman was a legend in her own lifetime. Born in Lithuania on 27th June 1869, she emigrated to the United States with her sister Helena in 1885. Like so many other East European immigrants, she found work in a clothing factory. The following year four Chicago anarchists were executed.

They had been prominent trade union activists leading the struggle for an eight-hour day. Framed for a bombing, the authorities hoped that this would scare off the emerging trade union movement, especially its anarchist component. The international outcry which followed these executions on trumped up charges helped to shape Emma's radical and anarchist ideals, which lasted throughout her long life.

Emma Goldman was a formidable public speaker and a prolific writer. Her whole life was devoted to struggle and she was controversial even within the radical and anarchist movement itself. She was one of the first radicals to address the issue of homosexuality, she was a fighter for women's rights, and she advocated the virtues of free love. These ideas were viewed with suspicion by those who

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placed their faith in the cure-all solution of economic class warfare and they were denounced by many of her contemporaries as “bourgeois inspired” at best.

To mainstream Americans, Emma was known as a demonic “dynamite eating anarchist”. She toured the States, agitating and lecturing everywhere she went. She was hounded for much of her life by FBI agents and was imprisoned in 1893, 1901, 1916, 1918, 1919, and 1921 on charges ranging from incitement to riot to advocating the use of birth control to opposition to World War 1.

A self proclaimed anarchist, Leon Czolgosz, assassinated President William McKinley in 1901 and this event unleashed a massive wave of anti-anarchist hysteria throughout the States. Emma was blamed for his action and was forced into hiding for a time. She was deported from the United States, Holland, France, and was denied entry to many other countries. None of this daunted her, she began publishing ‘Mother Earth’ magazine in 1906 and was very active in the No-Conscription League.

She shared a life long friendship with her political comrade Alexander Berkman. Both of them were deported from the USA to Russia in 1919. At first, Emma was excited to see at first hand the revolution she had fought to bring about all her life. However, it did not take long for her to realise that the Bolsheviks were not lovers of freedom nor partisans of workers’ control. What had been created was a massive dictatorship. The suppression of the Kronstadt rebellion by the Bolsheviks In 1921 was too much for Emma and Berkman, and they left Russia in a state of disillusionment.

She spent the next number of years moving from country to country and writing a long series of articles and two books about her experiences and struggles. She eventually lived in Britain for many years where she wrote her autobiography and continued supporting workers’ struggles in different parts of the world. Suffering from grave illness, Alexander Berkman committed suicide in 1936. Just a week later an anarchist inspired revolution erupted in Spain.

Over the next three years Emma committed herself to the support of the anarchists and their fight against fascism and Stalinism.

Her long and incredible life came to an end in 1940. Only after her death was she admitted back into America where she was buried in Chicago near the Haymarket martyrs who had helped to shape her life.