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Red November / Black November

Remembering Working Class Martyrs

Paul Burrows

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[Some brief remarks for “Red November / Black November,”
Winnipeg I.W.W. feast, November 15, 2014.]

It’s an honour to be invited to say a few words about memory and martyrs of the working class. But sadly, “labour’s dead” – the term used for tonight’s event description (at least on Facebook!) – is a HUGE category.

In November, it’s customary to commemorate those who sacrificed themselves in war – but I’m sure a gathering of Wobblies, anarchists, and socialists of varying stripes is well aware that this is an annual exercise typically exploited by State-corporate elites and war-mongers. The image of Stephen Harper wearing a plastic poppy and feigning solemnity every November 11th is enough to make one puke – especially given Harper’s concerted efforts to re-brand Canada as a “warrior nation,” divert funding from social programs to military ones, and expand Canada’s role in Western imperial projects worldwide.

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But we shouldn't let our disdain and disgust for Harper – or Canadian apologists for imperialism more generally – lead us to forget something important. Remembrance Day, just as with worthy events like “Red November / Black November,” affords us an opportunity to broaden the scope of our empathy and understanding about the nature of heroism and sacrifice.

Most of the soldiers who died in the big “officially sanctioned” wars (World War I, II, Korea, etc.) were members of the working class. The same holds true of more recent wars: from Afghanistan to Iraq. It's important to recognize this, even when we are critical of the policies and ideologies and material interests that drive such wars, and that sometimes seduce young working class kids to enlist. On the Left, we tend to celebrate the several thousand Canadians who volunteered to fight in Spain in the 1930s, as if they were all revolutionaries (they were NOT), and we tend to say very little about the dead (on either side) in the various state-sanctioned wars (as if *none* of them were revolutionary – many were – or *as if* only those who emerge from the womb as anarchists and dissidents are worthy of our support). We on the Left can be as selective about who to remember and who to honour as the ruling class. Some 45,000 Canadian soldiers, mostly workers, died in World War II. But 60 million people, mostly ordinary civilians, also died in World War II. The dominant narrative would have us focus exclusively on the soldiers who fell, primarily on those from our own country, as well as upon the 6 million Jews who were targeted for being Jewish. But that leaves out most of the dead. When we do that, we're basically saying that those other 50 plus million dead, from a single war, were unworthy victims.

One of the wonderful things about a night like this, is that we can broaden our umbrella of empathy and awareness. Labour's dead includes the overwhelming majority of soldiers past and present. It includes the ones who died believing the myths that led to their enlistment, and the ones (like Iraq war veteran Tomas Young – who just died a few days ago in Seattle on November

Thanks folks, and carry on with your feast.

10th) who initially survived, and only later began to question the narrative they were fed.

Labour's dead also includes a lot of complicated stories: like the fact that fully one-third of all St. Peter's / Peguis First Nations men volunteered for World War I – literally in the wake of, and in the midst of, being stripped of their treaty rights and dispossessed of their territorial birthright, in southern Manitoba. These people weren't fighting for some Leftist conception of the "working class" or revolution, but most of them were certainly "of" the working class in terms of their relationship to the so-called "means of production".

"Labour's dead" also includes people who died on the job, doing the rote and the dangerous tasks in industries with minimal to no safety regulations. In 1992, for example, 26 coal miners were killed in Nova Scotia's Westray disaster – and absolutely no one was punished for what even the media and a public inquiry acknowledged to be a predictable consequence of mismanagement and inadequate safety regulations. We ought to know the names of those killed by capitalism, just as we ought to know the names of the fourteen women killed by misogyny in Montreal on December 6th. But tragedies such as Westray can also distract us from a starker reality: that almost 1,000 Canadians die every single year in workplace accidents – roughly three per day on average – mostly in the construction and manufacturing sectors. How the hell does a single soldier getting shot in Ottawa by a mentally unstable gunman with *zero* connection to organized crime or terrorism justify the strengthening of wide-ranging "anti-terror" legislation – but daily deaths from unregulated capitalism are accepted as a given? (Okay, it's a rhetorical question – I'm sure this audience has its own plausible answers.)

Now, you might be thinking, there's an important distinction to be made between someone killed, and someone martyred. A martyr dies for *self-conscious* principles – is, in fact, killed for holding them. Not everyone who dies in war, or in workplace accidents, would

qualify as a martyr in this strict sense of term. I don't want to minimize the deaths of those who were killed by institutional business-as-usual just because they themselves never articulated some kind of radical left, or working-class consciousness. But the distinction is nevertheless important, and probably what I was meant to address when invited here to speak.

Not everyone who dies is a martyr. A martyr is someone who bears witness and testifies. Or at least, that's the original meaning of the word. They suffer or die for their testimony – precisely *because* they stand up, bear witness, refuse to bend, they resist, and they fight.

There are countless examples and stories of fallen working class martyrs and heroes one could mention. I will only mention a couple, so you can all get back to your food and drink shortly.

Given that we're in Winnipeg, we can and should remember certain names. Steve Schezerbanowes and Mike Sokolowski were both killed (or died later) due to injuries sustained on "Bloody Saturday," June 21st, 1919, during the General Strike. In truth, we don't know much about them, though Sokolowski is often described as a tinsmith, and demonized in the Winnipeg newspapers of the day as an "alien" and a "stone thrower". I doubt any one in this room gives a shit if Sokolowski threw stones at the cops that day. But it seems clear that he died that day for believing in the right to strike -- with or without a union's endorsement. We should acknowledge that, remember that, and raise a glass to that.

I am going to wrap this up, but I would be remiss if I didn't widen our scope just enough to mention our sister city of Chicago, and the Haymarket martyrs. (Plus, Pat McGuire pretty much told me that I should talk about things "like Haymarket," and I certainly don't want to earn his ire.)

Five Chicago anarchists were sentenced to death for their ostensible involvement in the Haymarket affair – a public march and protest against police brutality in early May 1886 that resulted in at least seven dead cops and three times as many dead demonstrators.

These five, in many ways, became and remain the archetypal martyrs of the North American labour movement. One of them, Louis Lingg, committed suicide the night before he was to be executed. The other four (Albert Parsons, Adolph Fischer, George Engel, and August Spies) were hung on, coincidentally, November 11th, 1887. I'm pretty sure all of them were German-American anarchists, vilified as such, except for Parsons (who was a veteran of the Civil War on the Confederate side, and not incidentally, the husband of anarchist, feminist & IWW co-founder Lucy Parsons).

What is there to say about Haymarket – other than to note that the evidence used to charge and condemn these five men, and the two others who received commuted sentences, was tenuous at best. They were clearly targeted for their political principles, and their unwavering commitment to workers' self-determination and a non-capitalist future. The events are important, and we should remember the names of the dead, and the vision of a better future that they aspired to. And we should remember also that May Day itself is celebrated as an international workers' day, to this day, because of Haymarket.

Anyway, so much more could be said. Each and every one of you in this room probably could recount equally significant stories. I am merely scratching the surface here. So I will just leave you, this evening, to reflect on and savor some of Albert Parson's final words, written from prison while awaiting execution:

"To other hands are now committed that task which was mine. ... Though fallen, wounded perhaps unto death, in the battle for liberty, the standard ... which my hands bore aloft in the midst of the struggle is caught up by other hands, and will be again and again, if needs, till the crimson banner waves in triumph over the enemies of peace, brotherhood, and happiness. And now to all I say: Falter not. Lay bare the inequities of capitalism; expose the slavery of law; proclaim the tyranny of government; denounce the greed, cruelty, abominations of the privileged class who riot and revel on the labor of their wage-slaves. Farewell."