

# The Bomb at Haymarket

Sidney Lens

1986

The Long Strike of 1875 and the Railroad War of 1877 were defensive actions to avert wage cuts at a time when the advance of organized labor generally was sliding backward. The national strike for the eight-hour day that began on May 1, 1886, marked a change in proletarian direction. The movement had expanded since the setbacks of the 1870s and was poised for a major leap forward, the accomplishment of a dream held for generations.

The National Laborer had expressed the belief back in 1836, when the workday was still twelve hours long and often more, that “eight hours daily labor is more than enough for any man to perform.” The demand was heard more frequently in the 1850s through the efforts of a few special groups launched specifically to win that objective and proclaimed at many labor meetings. Then in 1863 the Machinists and Blacksmiths Union and the Boston Trades Assembly jointly appropriated \$800 to lobby for eight hours, entrusting the task to a relatively young machinist in his early thirties, Ira Steward. For Steward, who devoted his life to this one goal, the shorter workday was more than a means of gaining leisure; it would give the workingman an opportunity to study politics and formulate plans to check the “corruptions of capital.” It was the only means, said Steward, to preserve democracy and emancipate workers “from slavery and ignorance and the vices and poverty.” Steward’s wife, Mary, composed a couplet, soon to be heard on thousands of lips:

*Whether you work by the piece or work by the day, Decreasing the hours, increases the pay.*

On Steward’s initiative hundreds of Eight-Hour Leagues were formed from 1865 to 1868, fifty in California alone, and together with the National Labor Union—founded by one of the noblest of labor leaders, William H. Sylvester—the agitation was accelerated. Responding to the vox populi six states and a number of cities legislated eight-hour labor laws in 1868, and Congress passed a bill covering its own employees. Most of the laws, however, were full of glaring loopholes—some requiring, for instance, that both the worker and the employer concur before the shorter workday could become operative. In other instances wages were cut proportionate to the cut in hours, thus making the law meaningless. In the end the entire effort turned out to be a pyrrhic victory.

But the idea of the eight-hour day, which was latent during the bleak 1870s, became overt in the 1880s—as a combination of prosperity and interunion rivalry gave it momentum — The 1880s,

despite the 1883–85 slump, witnessed fabulous economic expansion. Capital invested in manufacture zoomed from \$2.8 billion to \$6.5 billion, the number of factory hands doubled and five and a quarter million immigrants came to these shores seeking surcease from Europe's sorrow. Though labor shared minutely, if at all, in the materialist glories of the decade-President Grover Cleveland in 1888 spoke of the poor being "trampled to death beneath an iron heel"—no nation on earth was doing nearly so well over-all as the United States. There was a feeling in proletarian circles that capital could afford the shorter day (at the old pay) without too much strain, and that now was the time to get it.

The union rivalry referred to above was more subtle. It was between two organizations with unwieldy names—the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions of the United States and Canada, formed in 1881 under the guiding hand of a Dutch-Jewish cigarmaker born in London, Samuel Gompers; and the Noble Order of the Knights of Labor, secretly established in 1869 by nine garment workers in Philadelphia. Neither was particularly massive in membership at the beginning of the decade, but by 1886 the Knights had spurted to 700,000 members, probably more than all the previous labor federations combined. A strike in 1885 against the three rail lines controlled by Jay Gould—the Wabash, the Missouri Pacific, and the Missouri, Kansas and Texas—had gained for the Knights a quick victory, restoration of a 15 percent wage-cut, and such acclaim that its national membership increased thirteenfold from what it had been in 1883.

Ironically, the Knights were opposed to strikes in principle. Terence V. Powderly, the vain but able former mayor of Scranton who headed the organization in its most productive years, considered the strike "a relic of barbarism." It might be, he conceded, necessary on occasion, but was to be avoided as much as possible since it offered only "temporary relief." This thesis flowed inexorably from Powderly's doctrine that while there was friction between workers and capitalists, especially the greedier ones among the latter, there was no fundamental conflict between the two. And the strength of this attitude was reinforced by a long list of disasters: defeat of the telegraphers in 1883; of 4,000 coal miners in Hocking Valley after two years on the picket line; of 5,000 textile operatives in Fall River whose ranks were sundered by the import of Swedish strikebreakers; of building tradesmen in Buffalo; of molders and cigarmakers in Cincinnati, and so on.

Instead of strikes, then, the Knights of Labor concentrated on "uplift." It created two hundred producer and consumer co-operatives, agitated on the legislative front for such reforms as free land, the eight-hour day, abolition of child labor, the income tax, public ownership of railroads. And when it took action against rapacious capitalists, it was in the form of boycotts far more than strikes. In its day the Knights conducted the most successful labor boycotts in history—against newspapers, manufacturers and retailers of beer, flour, cigars, stoves, shoes, clothing, carpets, pianos, etc.

Naive as this program of co-operation, reform, and boycott seems today, it excited working people passionately in the 1880s. The slogan of the Knights, "an injury to one is the concern of all," welded men and women into an almost religious solidarity that neither the AFL nor the CIO have ever been able to match. Many a socialist who believed in revolution rather than "uplift" joined the Knights because of its "beautiful watchword" as one socialist put it.

In 1884 Powderly's organization was on the ascendancy, the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions, though only three years old, in decline. Eschewing both "uplift" and revolution, the federation, formed by representatives of about one hundred local and national organizations, promoted what became known as "simple" unionism. Its basic philosophy—and that of the AFL

later on-was contained in a statement made to the Senate Committee on Education and Welfare in 1883: "We have no ultimate ends... We are fighting only for immediate objects that can be realized in a few years. We are opposed to theorists... We are practical men." Not that these men were hostile to radicalism. To the contrary, Sam Gompers, as a young cigarmaker in New York, used to read socialist tracts to his fellow workers as they rolled the noxious weed, and boasted he was a socialist sympathizer. Peter J. McGuire, secretary of the carpenters' union, was a card-carrying member in the socialist movement. But they believed that there was a time and a place for revolutionary propaganda, a time and a place for tradeunion activity, and the two were mutually exclusive. Being practical, they also rejected "uplift" as pie in the sky. They argued that the goals of labor ought to be mundane-higher wages, shorter hours-and the primary instrument for achieving them, when negotiations failed, the strike.

Much to the chagrin of the simple unionists, the American worker was not yet buying their notion of practicality. Succeeding federation conventions attracted a maximum of twenty-six and as few as nineteen delegates. In an effort, therefore, to save itself from extinction the federation inaugurated an eight-hour campaign in 1884. Next year the federation renewed its proposal and set May 1, 1886 as the date for a general strike nationwide, to attain the shorter workday. The federation, of course, was in no position to undertake such a venture on its own-its membership at most was 25,000-and the leadership of the Knights of Labor, while advocating an eight-hour day, intended to win on the legislative front, not through "relics of barbarism" such as the strike. Nonetheless the call had electrifying impact, and if Powderly shunned it, the "general assemblies" of the Knights, at the grass roots, embraced it jubilantly. So did another force, the anarcho-syndicalists of Chicago, whose role in the impending walkout was to prove more important than that of any other.

The slogan "Eight Hours to Constitute a Day's Work" was so popular that thousands of laborers brought and wore "Eight-Hour Shoes," smoked "Eight-Hour Tobacco," and sang an "Eight-Hour Song":

*We mean to make things over; we're tired of toil for naught,  
But bare enough to live on: never an hour for thought.*

*We want to feel the sunshine; we want to smell the flowers;  
We're sure that God has willed it, and we mean to have eight hours.*

*We're summoning our forces from shipyard, shop and mill:  
Eight hours for work, eight hours for rest, eight hours for what we will!*

As the appointed day for the strike approached excitement ran high everywhere and particularly in the metropolis of Chicago, where the anarcho-syndicalists were in the vanguard of events.

May 1, 1886, was a beautiful Saturday in Chicago-clear, with a bright sun beaming on the quiet panorama below. On Michigan Avenue near the lake, thousands of men, women, and children exchanged pleasantries and joshed with each other as they waited for the parade to begin. Elation was in the air: employers had already granted the shorter workday to 45,000 workers in the city, including 35,000 in the packinghouses. All told in the next couple of days, 340,000 men and women would down tools in 12,000 establishments nationally, almost a quarter of them in Chicago.

Waiting with the multitude was Albert Parsons, the young man who during the great strikes of 1877 had been warned by Chicago's police chief to leave town or be hung "to a lamp post." Parsons was now thirty-eight years old, a national figure in the labor and radical movement, idol of both the native and foreign-born workers in his city. On the Sunday before, April 25, he and his close friend August Spies had addressed a massive rally of 25,000 in preparation for this parade and the accompanying strike. On the morning of May 1, the Chicago Mail gave the city an editorial warning that There are two dangerous ruffians at large in this city; two skulking cowards who are trying to create trouble. One of them is named Parsons; the other is named Spies... Mark them for today... Make an example of them if trouble does occur.

With Parsons on Michigan Avenue were his lovely wife, the former Lucy Ella Gathings, and their two children, Lulu Eda, seven, Albert, eight. Parsons, a trim, high-spirited man, logical in thought, poetic in expression-he often ended a speech with a recitation of poetry-was as much fitted, by his early background, to be a reactionary as a blazing radical. Youngest of three children in a solid middle-class Yankee family that traced its American heritage back to 1632, he was born in 1848 in Montgomery, Alabama, to which his parents emigrated immediately after their wedding in New England.

Orphaned at five, he was sent to live on the ranch of his oldest brother in Texas, and was brought up by a black slave, Aunt Esther, who, he later recalled, was "my constant companion and had always given me a mother's love." At eleven Albert was apprenticed as a printer in Galveston and at thirteen, though short in stature, went to fight with the Confederate cavalry in the Civil War. A good horseman and an excellent shot, he remained with the southern forces until the end of hostilities.

Returning after four years of war, Parsons had second thoughts about having fought to uphold slavery; he could not face his Aunt Esther, now freed from bondage. Ultimately he had a talk with the black woman who had virtually been his mother; it was, he said later, the turning point in his life. He started publishing a small weekly in Waco, Texas, the Spectator, espousing the rights of liberated blacks. For a long time none of his white friends would talk to him; he received repeated threats of lynching. Nonetheless he continued publishing the paper until his money was gone, and often stumped for the Republican Reconstructionists- "scalawags" -who had similar views. By the simple process of extending his humanism from the race issue to social problems generally, Parsons became an ardent socialist.

In 1872 he married a comely girl of Black and Mexican Indian extraction, who had been living with a former slave. Lucy Gathings was not only to be Albert Parsons' wife but political comrade, and an important leftist figure on her own right many years after Albert had been hanged from the gallows. The two newlyweds departed from Texas for Philadelphia in 1873, then Chicago. Here, as they were getting settled and Parsons took a job as typesetter for the Chicago Times, they observed the effects of the depression on the underclasses: the misery, the hunger, the demonstrations and police clubbings, the denial of free speech. They pored over the works of Karl Marx and Lewis Henry Morgan to find an explanation for such tragedies, and in 1876 joined the Workingmen's Party. A year later, as already noted, Parsons was embroiled in the 1877 riots. He emerged with a national reputation and was called upon to address working class meetings as far west as Nebraska and as far east as New York.

Meanwhile the socialist movement was in another of its interesting upheavals, enmeshed in a dispute between those who held that the party (now rechristened the Socialistic Labor Party) could seize state power through elections, and those who claimed that elections or no, the bour-

geoisie would never yield its position, unless compelled to do so by “armed resistance.” Though Parsons had run for alderman in Chicago in 1877 and had put a local ticket on the ballot in 1880, he was one of the key figures that seceded from the SLP in 1881 to launch the Revolutionary Socialist Party~ It was not a large group-5,000 or 6,000 members at its peak, one third of them in Chicago-and it was seriously divided from the outset. An eastern wing, led by Johann Most, advocated “propaganda of the deed” and shunned existing unions; a western wing, led by Parsons and Spies, considered unions the embryo of the future society and work within them indispensable for creation of the “workers’ commonwealth.” Both subscribed to the theory that the state per se was the enemy of social progress and that tomorrow’s society would be run by some kind of loose federation of producers’ groups. But Parsons believed that the Revolutionary Socialists had to work to alleviate the lot of the worker immediately as well as for tomorrow; and it was this concept which propelled his Chicago anarcho-syndicalists into national prominence.

Taking to their task with vigor the revolutionists founded five journals in 1884 and thereafter: the semi-monthly Alarm in English (2,000 circulation, Parsons as editor), the daily Arbeiter-Zeitung (3,600 circulation, edited by Spies, assisted by Michael Schwab), two other German sheets (Vorbote and the Fackel) and one in Bohemian, the Budoucnost. Within a year the anarcho-syndicalists doubled their influence, and what was more, weaned away enough unions from the conservative Amalgamated Trades and Labor Assembly, and unionized enough in their own organizations to become the dominant force in the labor movement. Their Central Labor Union boasted twenty-two affiliates, including the eleven largest locals in Chicago. They provided, in addition to ideology and militancy, men of unquestioned talents for leadership-Parsons, August Spies, Michael Schwab, Spies’ assistant on the Arbeiter-Zeitung, Samuel Fielden, who many years earlier had been a lay preacher, Adolph Fischer, a printer. It was such men as these who gave the eight-hour movement its primary impetus in 1886. Had it not been for the Haymarket affair on May 4, this effort might have become the rallying point for the national labor movement. The American Federation of Labor, organized that year, had but 138,000 adherents, and the Knights of Labor was already beginning its decline into oblivion. What happened at Haymarket, however, halted anarcho-syndicalist aspirations for the time being.

Parsons could not have suspected this on that warm Saturday, May 1, as he, Lucy and the two children marched in the front lines of the procession to the lake front. There was an ominous atmosphere surrounding the parade: on the rooftops along the route, police, Pinkertons and militiamen were deployed with rifles poised, and in the city’s armories 1,350 National Guardsmen were waiting nervously for a call to action. But no one paid much attention to the sinister gunmen, and the parade took place without incident. At the meeting site speakers vented their feelings on the eight-hour day in a potpourri of languages: German, English, Bohemian, Polish. Spies, thirty-one years old, with blue eyes and exceptionally white skin, made a loud, dramatic speech that won the greatest applause. Parsons spoke eloquently, discoursing with his usual logic about the need for proletarian unity if labor were to become invincible. The crowd went home encouraged and enlivened.

With the parade over, Chicago tightened to meet the bigger crisis-the strike for the eight-hour day. Once again the city was in a state of semi-paralysis. The building industry and metal foundries were silent. Lumber-laden ships had tied up at the docks and three hundred more were expected to follow suit. Some of the rail yards had already been shut down by a strike over another issue. Within a day or two 65,000 to 80,000 workers were walking picketlines. Employers, in small and large groups, were meeting frantically at the Hotel Sherman and elsewhere, to plan

retaliatory strategy. Except for police clubbings to break up meetings, however, there was as yet no serious violence.

Trouble came on the afternoon of May 3—from another quarter. At the McCormick Harvester Works on the south side, 1,400 workers had been locked out since mid-February and were partly replaced by three hundred strikebreakers. Unrelated to that event, 6,000 lumber-shovers, on strike for eight hours, were meeting near Black Road, a few hundred yards away, to select a committee for talks with the employers. While August Spies addressed them, the workshift changed at McCormick's, and some of the lumbershovers drifted toward the harvester plant to help the lockedout workers heckle and attack the scabs. In a few minutes two hundred police arrived, and what had been a minor skirmish now became serious. Hearing gunfire and watching patrol wagons rush by, Spies and many others in his audience hastened to the scene—to be greeted with clubs and a hail of bullets. As the crowd scattered, at least four workmen lay dead, and more were wounded.

Blazing with anger, Spies headed for the Arbeiter-Zeitung's printshop, where he issued a fiery circular in English and German. Headed, "Revenge! Workingmen, to Arms!!!", the text read:

*The masters sent out their bloodhounds—the police; they killed 6 of your brothers at McCormick's this afternoon. They killed the poor wretches because they, like you, had the courage to disobey the supreme will of your bosses... They killed them to show you, "Free American Citizens," that you must be satisfied with whatever your bosses condescend to allow you, or you will get killed ... If you are men, if you are the sons of your grand sires, who have shed their blood to free you, then you will rise in your might, Hercules, and destroy the hideous monster that seeks to destroy you. To arms, we call you, to arms.*

It was signed "Your Brothers." A second leaflet issued next morning, May 4, called for a mass protest that evening at Haymarket Square on Randolph Street.

On the fourth, police continued their attacks on strikers—at Eighteenth Street and Morgan, at Thirty-Fifth Street and elsewhere. In the evening 3,000 people showed up at Haymarket. Parsons, just back from a trip to Cincinnati, took Lucy and the two children to the event, expecting no trouble. When he arrived, Spies was speaking, and the crowd, on seeing Parsons, burst into applause. He mounted the wagon which served as a platform and told the audience: "I am not here for the purpose of inciting anybody, but to speak out and tell the facts as they exist." He finished at 10 p.m. and soon left for a nearby saloon with his wife and children and some friends.

Mayor Harrison, who attended part of the meeting to see how things were going, left at about the same time, and advised police at the Desplaines Street Station, a half-block away, that everything was in order. The meeting's attendance was by now about a third of its original size, partly because it was late in the day and partly because a raw wind was blowing and rain beginning to fall. Just as Sam Fielden was concluding a rambling speech the crowd suddenly noticed Captain John Bonfield coming at them with 180 policemen. The Captain, not known for his subtlety and dubbed "clubber" by working people, gruffly commanded the assemblage to disperse "immediately and peaceably." "But Captain," said Fielden, "we are peaceable." In that moment, without warning, there was an earsplitting explosion. Someone had thrown a bomb, probably from an alley, into police ranks. One policeman was killed on the spot, seven died later, sixty were wounded. In the maddening confusion that followed, police fired wildly and clubbed everyone in sight. A number of citizens were killed by the police—how many is unknown and two hundred were injured.

To this day it has never been determined who threw the bomb. Police of course attributed it to an anarchist; Parsons claimed it was the work of an agent provocateur. "The possibility of an agent provocateur," comments Samuel Yellen in his chronicle, *American Labor Struggles* (1936), "must not be dismissed offhand. The police officials in Chicago were at this time quite equal to such a scheme." Another hypothesis, favored by the prosecution, was that the bomb had been produced by Louis Lingg, a carpenter and an anarchist leader, and thrown by Rudolph Schnaubelt, Michael Schwab's brother-in-law. But Schnaubelt was twice arrested and twice released. Governor John P. Altgeld, when he pardoned the three surviving convicted men in 1893—destroying his career in the process—postulated that "the bomb was, in all probability, thrown by someone seeking personal revenge," rather than as a political manifestation. Altgeld gave as justification that for a number of years prior to the Haymarket affair there had been labor troubles, and in several cases a number of laboring people, guilty of no offense, had been shot down in cold blood by Pinkerton men, and none of the murderers were brought to justice.

It did not much matter who actually threw the bomb, however, since the ten men indicted for the crime (one left the country, another was released) were not charged with the actual murder, but with conspiracy to commit murder. What was on trial, it developed, was inflammatory speeches, writings, a political philosophy that called for liberation through violence. Only Fielden and Spies had been on the scene at the time of the explosion, but under the wide-rangmig doctrine of "conspiracy" the other seven anarcho-syndicalist leaders could be tried for inciting the act. "Convict these men," cried State's Attorney Julius S. Grinnell, "make examples of them, hang them, and you save our institutions."

In the days that followed Haymarket, the newspapers, both in Chicago and throughout the nation, opened the floodgates of hysteria about unionism. "These serpents," shouted the *Chicago Tribune*, "... have been emboldened to strike at society, law, order, and government." From the epithets hurled at the anarchists— "Dynamarchists .... Red Flagsters .... Bomb Slingers" — the general impression was that Parsons and his friends had themselves tossed the explosive, and so it was believed by a considerable segment of the population. The Chicago police immediately initiated a reign of terror. They arrested twenty-five printers at the *Arbeiter Zeitung*, wrecked presses, took subscription lists—used for further arrests—invaded radical offices, meeting halls, private homes, and beat and tortured conspiracy suspects while in jail. "Make the raids first and look up the law afterwards," Grinnell instructed the minions of the law. Everywhere the police announced they had found pistols, swords, rifles, ammunition, anarchist literature, dynamite, red flags. Nor was repression confined to Chicago: In Milwaukee the whole executive board of the local Knights of Labor was incarcerated, as were four officials of the Knights in Pittsburgh. Leaders of District Assembly 75 in New York were held on charges of "conspiracy" for conducting a strike against the Third Avenue Elevated.

Parsons, expecting the worst, went into hiding at once and only surfaced six weeks later when he calmly walked into court to stand trial with his comrades. Meanwhile Spies, Schwab, Fielden, Lingg, Fischer, George Engel, a toymaker, and Oscar Neebe, a yeastmaker who had earlier organized the beer-wagon drivers' and other unions, had been picked up and in quick order indicted for conspiracy to kill patrolman Mathias J. Degan.

The trial in Judge Joseph E. Gary's courtroom was a travesty. Candidates for the jury had been chosen by a special bailiff, instead of being selected at random. One of those picked, after the defense had exhausted its peremptory challenges, was a relative of a police victim. Others frankly conceded their prejudice against the accused but were permitted to serve anyway. Altgeld,

in his later pardon message, asserted that “much of the evidence given at the trial was a pure fabrication... “ Witnesses contradicted each other, some obviously lied. The jury was inundated with anarchist writings and documents, indicating that what was really on trial was a philosophy, not men charged with specific crimes. And, as expected, the jury found all eight guilty. Seven were sentenced to be hanged. Neebe was given a fifteen-year prison sentence.

On November 11, 1887, after all appeals had been exhausted, Spies, Engel, Fischer and Parsons mounted the gallows. Lingg had already cheated the hangman by exploding a dynamite cap in his mouth. Schwab and Fielden had asked for executive clemency and had had their sentences commuted to life imprisonment by Governor Richard Oglesby. The other four were executed. With nooses around their necks, waiting for the traps to be sprung, Fischer cried out: “Hurrah for Anarchy! This is the happiest moment of my life. “ Parsons said: “Will I be allowed to speak, O men of America? Let me speak, Sheriff Matson! Let the voice of the people be heard!” — From inside his hood, Spies made a short statement which would be heard for decades in workingclass circles: “The time will come when our silence will be more powerful than the voices you strangle today.”



The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



Sidney Lens  
The Bomb at Haymarket  
1986

Retrieved on August 11, 2016 from [web.archive.org](http://web.archive.org)  
Published in Roediger, Dave, and Franklin Rosemont, eds. *Haymarket Scrapbook*. Chicago:  
Charles H. Kerr Publishing Co., 1986.

**[theanarchistlibrary.org](http://theanarchistlibrary.org)**