
Origins of May Day: The Haymarket Affair

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Background

The **Haymarket affair** (also known as the **Haymarket massacre** or **Haymarket riot**) refers to the aftermath of a bombing that took place at a labor demonstration on Tuesday May 4, 1886, at Haymarket Square in Chicago. It began as a peaceful rally in support of workers striking for an eight-hour day. An unknown person threw a dynamite bomb at police as they acted to disperse the public meeting. The bomb blast and ensuing gunfire resulted in the deaths of seven police officers and at least four civilians; scores of others were wounded.

May Day parade and strikes

In October 1884, a convention held by the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions unanimously set May 1, 1886, as the date by which the eight-hour work day would become standard. As the chosen date approached, U.S. labor unions prepared for a general strike in support of the eight-hour day.

On Saturday, May 1, thousands of workers went on strike and rallies were held throughout the United States, with the cry, “Eight-hour day with no cut in pay.” Estimates of the number of striking workers across the U.S. range from 300,000 to half a million.

On May 3, striking workers in Chicago met near the McCormick Harvesting Machine Company plant. Union molders at the plant had been locked out since early February and the predominantly Irish-American workers at McCormick had come under attack from Pinkerton guards during an earlier strike action in 1885. Speaking to a rally outside the plant on May 3, August Spies advised the striking workers to “hold together, to stand by their union, or they would not succeed.” Well-planned and coordinated, the general strike to this point had remained largely nonviolent. When the end-of-the-workday bell sounded, however, a group of workers surged to the gates to confront the strikebreakers. Despite calls for calm by Spies, the police fired on the crowd. Two McCormick workers were killed (although some newspaper accounts said there were six fatalities). Spies would later testify, “I was very indignant. I knew from experience of the past that this butchering of people was done for the express purpose of defeating the eight-hour movement.”

Outraged by this act of police violence, local anarchists quickly printed and distributed fliers calling for a rally the following day at **Haymarket Square** (also called **the Haymarket**), which was then a bustling commercial center near the corner of Randolph Street and Desplaines Street. Printed in German and English, the fliers claimed that the police had murdered the strikers on behalf of business interests and urged workers to seek justice.

Rally at Haymarket Square

The rally began peacefully under a light rain on the evening of May 4. Spies, Albert Parsons, and Samuel Fielden spoke to a crowd estimated variously between 600 and 3,000 while standing in an open wagon adjacent to the square on Des Plaines Street. A large number of on-duty police officers watched from nearby.

Paul Avrich, a historian specializing in the study of anarchism, quotes Spies as saying:

“There seems to prevail the opinion in some quarters that this meeting has been called for the purpose of inaugurating a riot, hence these warlike preparations on the part of so-called ‘law and order.’ However, let me tell you at the beginning that this meeting has not been called for any such purpose. The object of this meeting is to explain the general situation of the eight-hour movement and to throw light upon various incidents in connection with it.”

Following Spies' speech, the crowd was addressed by Parsons, the Alabama-born editor of the radical English-language weekly *The Alarm*. Parsons spoke for almost an hour before standing down in favor of the last speaker of the evening, The British socialist Samuel Fielden, delivered a brief 10 minute address. Many of the crowd had already left as the weather was deteriorating. A *New York Times* article, with the dateline May 4 and headlined “Rioting and Bloodshed in the Streets of Chicago ... Twelve Policemen Dead or Dying,” reported that Fielden spoke for 20 minutes, alleging that his words grew “wilder and more violent as he proceeded.” Another *New York Times* article, headlined “Anarchy’s Red Hand” and dated May 6, opens with: “The villainous teachings of the Anarchists bore bloody fruit in Chicago tonight and before daylight at least a dozen stalwart men will have laid down their lives as a tribute to the doctrine of Herr Johann Most.” It refers to the strikers as a “mob” and uses quotation marks around the term “workingmen.”

The bombing and gunfire

At about 10:30 pm, just as Fielden was finishing his speech, police arrived en masse, marching in formation towards the speakers' wagon, and ordered the rally to disperse. Fielden insisted that the meeting was peaceful. Police Inspector John Bonfield commanded the crowd to disperse.

A home-made bomb with a brittle metal casing filled with dynamite and ignited by a fuse, was thrown into the path of the advancing police. Its fuse briefly sputtered, then the bomb exploded, killing policeman Mathias J. Degan with flying metal fragments and mortally wounding six other officers.

Witnesses maintained that immediately after the bomb blast there was an exchange of gunshots between police and demonstrators. Accounts vary widely as to who fired first and whether any of the crowd fired at the police. Historian Paul Avrich maintains that the police fired on the fleeing demonstrators, reloaded and then fired again, killing four and wounding as many as 70 people. What is not disputed is that in less than five minutes the square was empty except for the casualties. According to the May 4 *New York Times* demonstrators began firing at the police, who then returned fire. In his report on the incident, Inspector Bonfield wrote that he “gave the order to cease firing, fearing that some of our men, in the darkness might fire into each other.”

In all, seven policemen and at least four workers were killed. Another policeman died two years after the incident from complications related to injuries received on that day. About 60 policemen were wounded in the incident. They were carried, along with some other wounded people, into a nearby police station. Police captain Michael Schaack later wrote that the number of wounded workers was “largely in excess of that on the side of the police”. The *Chicago Herald* described a scene of “wild carnage” and estimated at least fifty dead or wounded civilians lay in the streets. It is unclear how many civilians were wounded since many were afraid to seek medical attention, fearing arrest.

Aftermath and red scare

A harsh anti-union clampdown followed the Haymarket incident. There was a massive outpouring of community and business support for the police and many thousands of dollars were donated to funds for their medical care and to assist their efforts. The entire labor and immigrant community, particularly Germans and Bohemians, came under suspicion. Police raids were carried out on homes and offices of suspected anarchists. Scores of suspects, many only remotely related to the Haymarket affair, were arrested. Casting legal requirements such as search warrants aside, Chicago police squads subjected the labor activists of Chicago to an eight-week shakedown, ransacking their meeting halls and places of business. The emphasis was on the speakers at the Haymarket rally and the newspaper, *Arbeiter-Zeitung*. A small group of anarchists were discovered to have been engaged in making bombs on the same day as the incident, including round ones like the one used in Haymarket Square.

Newspaper reports declared that anarchist agitators were to blame for the “riot”, a view adopted by an alarmed public. As time passed press reports and illustrations of the incident became more elaborate. Coverage was national, then international. Among property owners, the press, and other respectable elements of society, a consensus developed that suppression of anarchist agitation was necessary. While for their part, union organizations such as The Knights of Labor and craft unions were quick to disassociate themselves from the anarchist movement and to repudiate violent tactics as self-defeating.

Legal proceedings

The Defendants

Rudolf Schnaubelt, the police’s lead suspect as the bomb thrower, was arrested twice early on and released. By May 14, when it became apparent he had played a significant role in the event, he had fled the country. William Seliger, who had turned state’s evidence and testified for the prosecution, was not charged. On June 4, 1886, seven other suspects, however, were indicted by the grand jury and stood trial for being accessories to the murder of Degan. Of these, only two had been present when the bomb exploded. Newspaper editor August Spies and Samuel Fielden had spoken at the peaceful rally and were stepping down from the speaker’s wagon in compliance with police orders to disperse just before the bomb went off. Two others had been present at the beginning of the rally but had left and were at Zepf’s Hall, an anarchist rendezvous, at the time of the explosion. They were: *Arbeiter-Zeitung* typesetter Adolph Fischer and the well-known activist Albert Parsons, who had spoken for an hour at the Haymarket rally before going to Zepf’s. Parsons, who believed that the evidence against them all was weak, subsequently voluntarily turned himself in, in solidarity with the accused.

A third man, Spies’s assistant editor Michael Schwab (who was the brother-in-law of Schnaubelt) was arrested since he was speaking at another rally at the time of the bombing (he was also later pardoned). Not directly tied to the Haymarket rally, but arrested because they were notorious for their militant radicalism were George Engel (who was at home playing cards on that day), and Louis Lingg, the hot-headed bomb maker denounced by his associate, Seliger. Another defendant who had not been present that day was Oscar Neebe, an American-born citizen of German descent who was associated with the *Arbeiter-Zeitung* and had attempted to revive it in the aftermath of the trial. Of the eight defendants, five – Spies, Fischer, Engel, Lingg and Schwab – were German-born immigrants; a sixth, Neebe, was a U.S.-born citizen of German descent. Only the remaining two, Parsons and Fielden, born in the U.S. and England, respectively, were of British heritage.

Trial

The trial, *Illinois vs. August Spies et al.*, began on June 21, 1886, and went on until August 11. The trial was conducted in an atmosphere of extreme prejudice by both public and media toward the defendants. It was

presided over by Judge Joseph Gary. Judge Gary displayed open hostility to the defendants, consistently ruled for the prosecution, and failed to maintain decorum. A motion to try the defendants separately was denied. The defense counsel included Sigmund Zeisler, William Perkins Black, William Foster, and Moses Salomon. Selection of the jury was extraordinarily difficult, lasting three weeks, and nearly one thousand persons called. All union members and anyone who expressed sympathy toward socialism were dismissed. In the end a jury of 12 was seated, most of whom confessed prejudice towards the defendants. Despite their professions of prejudice Judge Gary seated those who declared that despite their prejudices they would acquit if the evidence supported it, refusing to dismiss for prejudice. Eventually the peremptory challenges of the defense were exhausted. Frustrated by the hundreds of jurors who were being dismissed, a bailiff was appointed who selected jurors rather than calling them at random. The bailiff proved prejudiced himself and selected jurors who seemed likely to convict based on their social position and attitudes toward the defendants.

The prosecution, led by Julius Grinnell, argued that since the defendants had not actively discouraged the person who had thrown the bomb, they were therefore equally responsible as conspirators. The jury heard the testimony of 118 people, including 54 members of the Chicago Police Department and the defendants Fielden, Schwab, Spies and Parsons. Albert Parsons' brother claimed there was evidence linking the Pinkertons to the bomb. This reflected a widespread belief among the strikers.

Verdict

The jury returned guilty verdicts for all eight defendants. Before being sentenced, Neebe told the court that Schaack's officers were among the city's worst gangs, ransacking houses and stealing money and watches. Schaack laughed and Neebe retorted, "You need not laugh about it, Captain Schaack. You are one of them. You are an anarchist, as you understand it. You are all anarchists, in this sense of the word, I must say." Judge Gary sentenced seven of the defendants to death by hanging and Neebe to 15 years in prison. The sentencing provoked outrage from labor and workers' movements and their supporters, resulting in protests around the world, and elevating the defendants to the status of martyrs, especially abroad. Portrayals of the anarchists as bloodthirsty foreign fanatics in the press along with the 1889 publication of Captain Schaack's sensational account, *Anarchy and Anarchism*, on the other hand, inspired widespread public fear and revulsion against the strikers and general anti-immigrant feeling, polarizing public opinion.

Commutations and suicide

After the appeals had been exhausted, Illinois Governor Richard James Oglesby commuted Fielden's and Schwab's sentences to life in prison on November 10, 1887. On the eve of his scheduled execution, Lingg committed suicide in his cell with a smuggled blasting cap which he reportedly held in his mouth like a cigar (the blast blew off half his face and he survived in agony for six hours).

Executions

The time will come when our silence will be more powerful than the voices you strangle today!

— August Spies

The next day (November 11, 1887) four defendants—Engel, Fischer, Parsons, and Spies—were taken to the gallows in white robes and hoods. They sang the Marseillaise, then the anthem of the international revolutionary movement. Family members including Lucy Parsons, who attempted to see them for the last time, were arrested and searched for bombs (none were found). According to witnesses, in the moments before the men were hanged, Spies shouted, "The time will come when our silence will be more powerful than the voices you strangle today!" Witnesses reported that the condemned men did not die immediately when they dropped, but strangled to death slowly, a sight which left the spectators visibly shaken.

Pardon and historical characterization

Among supporters of the labor movement in the United States and abroad and others, the trial was widely believed to have been unfair, and even a serious miscarriage of justice. Prominent people such as novelist William Dean Howells; celebrated attorney Clarence Darrow; poet and playwright Oscar Wilde; and playwright George Bernard Shaw strongly condemned it. On June 26, 1893, Illinois Governor John Peter Altgeld, the progressive governor of Illinois, himself a German immigrant, signed pardons for Fielden, Neebe, and Schwab, calling them victims of “hysteria, packed juries, and a biased judge” and noting that the state “has never discovered who it was that threw the bomb which killed the policeman, and the evidence does not show any connection whatsoever between the defendants and the man who threw it.” Altgeld also faulted the city of Chicago for failing to hold Pinkerton guards responsible for repeated use of lethal violence against striking workers.

Christopher Thale in the *Encyclopedia of Chicago*, writes that lacking credible evidence regarding the bombing, the prosecution focused on the writings and speeches of the defendants. He further notes that the conspiracy charge was legally unprecedented, the Judge was “partisan,” and all the jurors admitted prejudice against the defendants. Historian Carl Smith writes: “The visceral feelings of fear and anger surrounding the trial ruled out anything but the pretense of justice right from the outset.” Smith notes that scholars have long considered the trial a “notorious” “miscarriage of justice.” In a review somewhat more critical of the defendants, historian Jon Teaford concludes that “[t]he tragedy of Haymarket is the American justice system did not protect the damn fools who most needed that protection... It is the damn fools who talk too much and too wildly who are most in need of protection from the state.” In 2011, labor historian Timothy Messer-Kruse published a history. Based on his examination of the trial transcripts and other archival material, he concludes there is abundant evidence connecting defendants to advocacy of violence and preparations for it. He argues that Chicago’s anarchists were indeed “part of an international terrorist network and did hatch a conspiracy to attack police with bombs and guns that May Day weekend”; and he calls the evidence establishing the guilt of “most of the defendants” “overwhelming.” Moreover, Messer-Kruse opines that the trial was fair “by the standards of the age” and the jury representative. According to him, “The tragic end of the story was the product not of prosecutorial eagerness to see the anarchists hang, but largely due to a combination of the incompetence of the defendant’s lawyers and their willingness to use the trial to vindicate anarchism rather than to save the necks of their clients.”

Effects on the labor movement and May Day

The Haymarket affair was a setback for the American labor movement and its fight for the eight-hour day. Yet it also can be seen as strengthening its resistance, especially in Chicago, where, as historian Nathan Fine points out, trade union activities continued to show signs of growth and vitality, culminating later in 1886 with the establishment of the Labor Party of Chicago.

Popular pressure continued for the establishment of the 8-hour day. At the convention of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) in 1888, the union decided to campaign for the shorter workday again. May 1, 1890, was agreed upon as the date on which workers would strike for an eight-hour work day.

In 1889, AFL president Samuel Gompers wrote to the first congress of the Second International, which was meeting in Paris. He informed the world’s socialists of the AFL’s plans and proposed an international fight for a universal eight-hour work day. In response to Gompers’s letter, the Second International adopted a resolution calling for “a great international demonstration” on a single date so workers everywhere could demand the eight-hour work day. In light of the Americans’ plan, the International adopted May 1, 1890 as the date for this demonstration.

A secondary purpose behind the adoption of the resolution by the Second International was to honor the memory of the Haymarket martyrs and other workers who had been killed in association with the strikes on May 1, 1886. Historian Philip Foner writes “[t]here is little doubt that everyone associated with the

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resolution passed by the Paris Congress knew of the May 1 demonstrations and strikes for the eight-hour day in 1886 in the United States ... and the events associated with the Haymarket tragedy.”

The first international May Day was a spectacular success. The front page of the *New York World* on May 2, 1890, was devoted to coverage of the event. Two of its headlines were “Parade of Jubilant Workingmen in All the Trade Centers of the Civilized World” and “Everywhere the Workmen Join in Demands for a Normal Day.” The *Times of London* listed two dozen European cities in which demonstrations had taken place, noting there had been rallies in Cuba, Peru and Chile. Commemoration of May Day became an annual event the following year.

The influence of the Haymarket affair was not limited to the celebration of May Day. Emma Goldman, the activist and political theorist, was attracted to anarchism after reading about the incident and the executions, which she later described as “the events that had inspired my spiritual birth and growth.” She considered the Haymarket martyrs to be “the most decisive influence in my existence.” Her associate, Alexander Berkman also described the Haymarket anarchists as “a potent and vital inspiration.” Others whose commitment to anarchism crystallized as a result of the Haymarket affair included Voltairine de Cleyre and “Big Bill” Haywood, a founding member of the Industrial Workers of the World. Goldman wrote to historian Max Nettlau that the Haymarket affair had awakened the social consciousness of “hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people.”

Figure 1. Engraving of the seven anarchists sentenced to death.

NOVEMBER 12, 1887.]

FRANK LESLIE'S ILLUSTRATED NEWSPAPER.

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