

The Haymarket frame-up and the origins of May Day

Part one

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We are republishing here a series of articles that originally appeared in April 1986 under the title “One hundred years since the Haymarket frameup.” The articles were published in the *Bulletin*, the newspaper of the Workers League, forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party in the US.

On the night of May 4, 1886, a crowd of several thousand workers gathered for a public rally at Haymarket Square in Chicago. Because the crowd was smaller than expected, it was moved to a different location a short distance away, to Desplains Street and Crane’s Alley behind the Crane Brothers metal products factory.

The rally had been called by the International Workingmen’s Party of America and its two leading organs in Chicago, the *Alarm* and the German-language *Arbeiter-Zeitung*.

A day earlier, at least two workers had been killed in a violent confrontation with police at the McCormick Reaper Works on Blue Island Avenue. The workers had been locked out since February by the owner, Cyrus H. McCormick, Jr., scion of the famous inventor, who had brought in 300 Pinkertons to escort the scabs. These were, in turn, reinforced by hundreds of police.

On May 1, the first May Day, more than 300,000 workers nationwide, including 40,000 in Chicago, walked off the job in support of the demand for an eight-hour day. While the Eight-Hour Day Movement was led officially by the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions of the US and Canada, the immediate forerunner of the American Federation of Labor in Chicago, it was under the leadership of the anarchists, in particular, those associated with the *Alarm* and *Arbeiter-Zeitung*.

The rally at Haymarket was called in response to the police violence the previous day at the reaper works and was proceeding peacefully, despite the buildup of tensions fueled by a vicious campaign in the capitalist press designed to provoke violence against the leaders of the movement in Chicago. The most prominent and popular of these leaders were the anarchists Albert Parsons and August Spies.

Despite the turmoil surrounding the eight-hour struggle in Chicago, it appeared as though the evening rally would end without incident. Samuel Fielden, another prominent anarchist, was addressing the crowd, which had dwindled to less than 1,000.

Fielden was finishing his remarks when police began advancing without warning on the remaining workers. As the workers began to disperse, a bomb exploded in the midst of the police, seriously injuring a number of them. One of the officers, Mathias J. Degan, died moments later from his wounds, and six more were to die over the next two weeks.

The police, led by the notorious Inspector John Bonfield, retaliated furiously, firing indiscriminately into the crowd, killing as many as eight

workers and injuring many more. Later, a total of 67 casualties killed or wounded were counted.

Eighteen months later, on November 11, 1887, four leading anarchists—Albert Parsons, August Spies, Adolph Fischer and George Engel—were executed by hanging at Cook County Jail. Another defendant, Louis Lingg, committed suicide the day before his scheduled execution. These men were the Haymarket Martyrs, and they occupy an honored place in the history of the class struggle both in the United States and internationally.

Two more anarchists, Michael Schwab and Samuel Fielden, were also convicted of murder in the death of Officer Degan. Also sentenced to death, they received a last-minute commutation from Governor Richard J. Oglesby. An eighth defendant in the trial, Oscar Neebe, was sentenced to 15 years in prison. Neebe, along with Fielden and Schwab, were later pardoned by Oglesby’s successor, Governor John Peter Altgeld.

May 4, 1986, marks the 100th anniversary of the Haymarket incident. What followed the bombing was the first great political witch hunt and frame-up trial involving working class fighters in the United States. It matched, in terms of the ferocity of the class hatred exhibited by the ruling class, the notorious Palmer Raids in 1919 and the frame-up and execution of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti in the 1920s.

The centenary of Haymarket has produced a large number of publications, both articles and books. Among the most valuable is *The Haymarket Tragedy*, by Paul Avrich, Princeton University Press, which not only vividly details the Haymarket incident and the subsequent execution of four working class fighters, but also brings to life this formative period in the history of the American proletariat.

US capitalism after the Civil War

The post-Civil War period witnessed the explosive development of American capitalism and the emergence of the working class. Having vanquished the Confederacy, Northern industrial capitalism could now expand westward unhindered. This geographical movement, combined with enormous advances in the productive forces, put an end to the predominance of the small manufacturer and individual craftsman.

Between 1860 and 1894 the United States moved from fourth place to first worldwide in the production of industrial goods. By 1894 this productive capacity accounted for one third of the world’s output.

Increasingly, the different branches of production were combined in huge monopolies or trusts. From the mining of natural resources, to the smelting of basic metals, to the manufacture of finished products, vast

amounts of wealth were being concentrated in fewer and fewer hands. Under conditions of the explosive ascendancy of American capitalism, the “Age of the Robber Barons” dawned.

Their wealth was obtained from the most brutal exploitation of the working class. In every American city of the 1870s and 1880s obscene extravagance coexisted with levels of poverty hitherto unknown in the United States. In no city were the class divisions more starkly juxtaposed than in Chicago.

The Great Chicago Fire of 1871, far from wiping the city off the map, served to accelerate its growth into the major manufacturing, transportation and financial center of the Midwest, and the country’s third largest city. Among the leading capitalists of the day in Chicago were Marshall Field, George Pullman, Phillip D. Armour and the already-mentioned Cyrus McCormick, Jr.

The explosive growth of American capitalism brought with it the first crisis of overproduction. The panic of 1873, followed by a depression which lasted until 1879, while not the first, was by far the worst economic crisis the country had yet experienced.

In *The Haymarket Tragedy*, author Paul Avrich describes the devastating impact of the slump on the working class:

“Tens of thousands went hungry. Cities like Chicago recorded a rising number of deaths from starvation, not only of single individuals, but of whole families. Homeless men and women wandered the streets, seeking shelter in hallways, sleeping on park benches and lining up daily before the soup kitchens established in working-class neighborhoods.

“Year after year the depression worsened. By 1877, according to some accounts, the number of unemployed had risen to nearly three million—in a nation of forty-five million people. As many as fifteen million, moreover, were living at the poverty level. Legions of tramps, for whom the *Chicago Tribune* prescribed ‘a little strychnine or arsenic,’ drifted across the country in search of work and shelter.” (Page 16, *The Haymarket Tragedy* by Paul Avrich; Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1984)

The unemployed demonstrated in Chicago—the capitalist papers calling their protests “bread riots.” The depression gave enormous impetus to the class struggle, and there was a profound radicalization of the working class. Already, in 1869, the Knights of Labor under Terence Powderly had been founded. But now, with the ever-mounting influx of European immigrants, particularly from Germany, more radical ideas—socialism, Marxism and anarchism—were finding a greater audience in the working class.

This radicalization reached its high point in Chicago under the leadership of the anarchists of the International Workingmen’s Party of America. The most important leaders of this party in Chicago, and probably nationwide, were Albert Parsons and August Spies.

Albert Parsons

Albert Parsons was born in Montgomery, Alabama, on June 20, 1848. His father Samuel, a native of Portland, Maine, had moved to Montgomery, where he established a shoe and leather factory. The Parsons were quintessentially “American.” They could trace their lineage back to the Mayflower and had an ancestor who served at the Battle of Bunker Hill during the American Revolutionary War.

By the age of five, Parsons was orphaned. He was sent to live with his older brother in Tyler, Texas. William Henry Parsons was an attorney and the proprietor of the *Telegraph*, a local Democratic paper. Through his brother’s influence, the younger Parsons became an apprentice for the *Galveston News*.

Parsons was raised a Southerner, so when the Civil War broke out he enlisted with the Army of the Confederacy. He was very young at the time, being only 17 when he was discharged. After the war, Parsons became a passionate defender of Reconstruction and a member of the Radical Republicans.

He started his own newspaper, the *Spectator*, in Waco, Texas. The publication was short-lived, however, as he increasingly drew the hatred of racist elements opposed to Reconstruction. They branded Parson a “scalawag” and forced him to leave Waco. Moving to Houston, where he worked for his brother, now the publisher of the *Houston Telegraph*, Parsons met his future wife and political collaborator, Lucy Del Gather.

In 1873, the Democrats regained control of the Texas legislature, ending the Reconstruction government in that state. This development, along with the increasing difficulties Parsons encountered due to his anti-racist views, finalized his decision to leave Texas.

Albert and Lucy Parsons arrived in Chicago in late 1873 and were immediately struck by the extreme poverty and exploitation of the working class. Parsons compared the conditions to the chattel slavery that had dominated the South. The “substance,” Parsons wrote, “remains the same: the capitalist in the former system owned the laborer, and hence his product, while under the latter, he owns the labor product and hence the person of the wage laborer.”

Parsons became active in the workers’ movement. He joined International Typographical Union Local 16, which is today one of the three unions on strike at the *Chicago Tribune*. One hundred years ago, this same *Tribune* was the official mouthpiece of the Chicago robber barons. As the Depression of the 1870s deepened and the protests grew, the *Tribune* was the principal source of the crudest anti-communism.

An 1875 *Tribune* editorial stated, in an ominous foreshadowing of the frame-up to come:

“If the communists in this country are counting on the looseness of our police system and the tendency to proceed against criminals by due process of law...they have ignored some of the most significant episodes of American history.... Judge Lynch is an American by birth and character. The Vigilance Committee is a peculiarly American institution.... Every lamp post in Chicago will be decorated with a communistic carcass if necessary to prevent wholesale incendiarism or prevent any attempt at it.”

During this period, Parsons was undergoing a profound political radicalization, and, for the first time, came into contact with the socialist movement. Parsons read what socialist literature was available, including the *Communist Manifesto* and other works dealing with economics and historical materialism.

He joined the Working Men’s Party, an organization which was at that time divided between two wings, a Marxist wing, favoring the organizing of trade unions and action to achieve economic gains, and the Lasalleans, who favored political action through the ballot box and opposed the fight for economic gains.

Railroad strike of 1877

The Great Railroad Strike of 1877 and its aftermath would open up these differences even further. The strike was sparked by the announcement of a 10 percent pay cut on July 17, 1877, by the Baltimore & Ohio Co. Already driven to the brink by the depression, workers rebelled and the strike spread like wildfire.

Avrich, in *The Haymarket Tragedy*, writes:

“Never before had America witnessed a nationwide uprising of workers,

an uprising so obstinate and bitter that it was crushed only after much bloodshed. Local police and state militias alone could not restore order. For the first time, federal troops had to be called out during peacetime to suppress a domestic disturbance. In the process, more than a hundred workmen were killed and several hundred wounded.

“For a full week the strike dominated the front pages of American newspapers. A new reality had entered American economic life. The first great collision between capital and labor, it was a harbinger of things to come.” (Page 26, *The Haymarket Tragedy* by Paul Avrich; Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1984)

The strike lasted for two weeks and spread to 17 states. In Chicago, the Working Men’s Party was receiving a hearing in the working class, much to the chagrin of the capitalist press. Parsons, who had for years been honing his oratorical skills, addressed thousands of workers. He was arrested during the strike, browbeaten and threatened with death by the police.

US infantry units were brought in and roving bands of Civil War veterans and armed vigilantes organized by the “Law and Order League,” headed by industrialist George Pullman, roamed the streets, attacking groups of workers. A number of workers were shot down by the troops, and the strike was broken.

Yet despite the strike’s defeat, the enormity and power of the first major struggle of the American working class pushed forward its development even more rapidly. Chicago became the strongest center of the Working Men’s Party, which changed its name to the Socialistic Labor Party (SLP) in December of 1877.

The Great Strike was largely an indigenous movement of the American working class, although immigrant workers certainly played a role. The capitalist press, however, reflecting the terror of the bourgeoisie at the first volcanic eruption of the working class, and its effort to maintain illusions in American exceptionalism, quickly attributed the uprising to “aliens” and their ideology.

A central political problem of the workers’ movement of that time was precisely the separation between the development of Marxism on American soil and the movement of the class struggle itself. Frederick Engels was particularly critical of the German-American Marxists, who tended to view Marxism as a credo rather than as a guide to action. Engels was adamant that the Germans had to “do off every remnant of foreign garb...and become out and out American.”

In the aftermath of the railroad strike, divisions within the SLP emerged over whether or not the party should continue to run candidates, and on the question of the armed struggle. In Chicago, a number of workers’ defense groups were formed. These included Lehr-und-Wehr Verein (Education and Defense Society), Bohemian Sharpshooters, Jaeger Verein and the Irish Labor Guards.

But it was over the question of the so-called “political” struggle, meaning the running of candidates, or socialism by the ballot vs. revolutionary action, that the split in the SLP would emerge.

During this period, Parsons and others in the leadership of the movement in Chicago and elsewhere were moving sharply to the left. One of the ablest of these leaders was August Spies.

August Spies

Spies was born in Landeck in southwest Germany, the son of a government forester. After his father’s death, Spies emigrated to the United States and moved to Chicago in 1873, where he became a small

tradesman in the upholstery business.

Like Parsons, Spies became radicalized under the impact of the depression and the Great Strike, becoming a leader among the German-American socialists in Chicago. After the strike, he joined both the Socialistic Labor Party and Lehr-und-Wehr Verein.

Spies was both a man of action and an intellectual, fluent in both German and English. Among the books he read was Marx’s *Capital* and Lewis Henry Morgan’s *Ancient Society*. While both he and Parsons became anarchists, Paul Avrich points out that they owed their political development to Marx as well as Proudhon, Bakunin and Kropotkin.

In October of 1880, Spies, Oscar Neebe and others were expelled from the SLP for opposing the party’s policy of running candidates in elections. Spies had become disillusioned after an SLP candidate, who won a place on the Chicago City Council, was fraudulently denied his seat. The final emancipation of labor, Spies wrote, would come about “through an economic struggle only, not through politics.”

Both Spies and Parsons were moving in the direction of anarchism and attended the Pittsburgh Congress in October of 1883. The Congress’s principal organizer was the German anarchist Johann Most.

Most was an uncompromising anarchist who advocated the violent overthrow of capitalism, and, as a follower of Bakunin, was sharply criticized by Marx and Engels. He was, nonetheless, a compelling orator and became a prominent leader of the growing anarchist movement in the United States.

Marx had fully supported the Paris Commune of 1871, analyzing it as the first attempt by the working class to seize power in its own right. The experience of the Commune, Marx concluded, demonstrated that the old state machinery had to be smashed and replaced by a new state democratically controlled by the workers—the dictatorship of the proletariat.

He was completely opposed to the anarchist formula of “abolishing the state,” a petty-bourgeois and utopian slogan which made no distinction between the class character of different states—feudal, bourgeois and proletarian—and therefore held the working class back from the political struggle to establish its own state power.

Engels explained the necessity for the dictatorship of the proletariat in an article, “On the Occasion of Karl Marx’s Death,” published in 1883:

“[W]e have always held that...the proletarian class will first have to possess itself of the organized political force of the State and with this aid stamp out the resistance of the Capitalist class and reorganize society. This is stated already in the *Communist Manifesto* of 1847, end of Chapter II.

“The Anarchists reverse the matter. They say that the Proletarian revolution has to begin by abolishing the political organization of the State. But after the victory of the Proletariat, the only organization the victorious working class finds ready-made for use is that of the State.

“It may require adaptation to the new functions. But to destroy it at such a moment would be to destroy the only organism by means of which the victorious working class can exert its newly conquered power, keep down its capitalist enemies and carry out that economic revolution of society without which the whole victory must end in a defeat and in a massacre of the working class like that after the Paris Commune.”

In the case of Parsons and Spies, their differences with Most were not over the question of the state, but of the necessity for union organization. They had already penetrated deeply into the workers’ movement and were ardent supporters of the trade unions.

While they agreed with Most on the need for armed insurrection to overthrow capitalism, they opposed his hostility to trade unionism. The two leaders from Chicago put forward what became known as the “Chicago Idea.”

To be continued



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